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NO FIGURE, DEAD OR LIVING, LAY THERE. THE ROOM WAS EMPTY!

See p. 22.

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MR. QUIXLEY

OF THE

GATE HOUSE

BY

PERCY JAMES BREBNER
(CHRISTIAN LYS)

AUTHOR OF
'THE FORTRESS OF VADASARA,' 'THE HEPSWORTH MILLIONS,'
'THE MYSTERY OF LADYPLACE,' ETC.

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MR. QUIXLEY OF THE GATE HOUSE

CHAPTER I

A SNOWY NIGHT

THERE had been an accident on the line the other side of Rayford Junction, owing to the sudden and heavy fall of snow, and no trains had run through to Docksmouth since six o'clock. It was snowing still, gently but persistently, and the country lay white and unreal, and had a ghostly light over it, whilst above the night was as black as Erebus.

The little wayside station of Camptown was deserted except for a solitary porter, who, getting what warmth he could out of the dying fire in the waiting-room, growled at railways in general and his own company in particular.

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Presently the air began to throb, and two gleaming eyes came stealing across the fields. The porter turned up the gas, and the train steamed into the station. It had been market-day at Rayford, and quite a small crowd of people alighted at Camptown, some inclined to be merry at the delay in getting home, whilst others were as vicious against railways as the porter had been.

One man, who seemed in no particular hurry, put his bag on a seat and lit a cigar. The light of the match as he protected it with his hands threw into sudden relief a singularly strong, if not exactly a handsome, face. The eyes were steady and unflinching, the mouth purposeful. Such a man would lead rather than be led, and be as good a friend as he could be an implacable enemy.

He waited until the crowd had dispersed, and then went towards the barrier.

'A bad night, porter.'

'Very, sir.'

'I am likely to have a lonely walk to Dean.'

'Well, I didn't notice nobody go through as goes that way, sir. You turns to the right when you gets to the top of the road.'

'Thanks, I know my way. Good-night.'

He turned up the collar of his coat, and at a

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brisk pace set out upon his three-miles walk to Dean. To the top of the road the snow was trodden by the crowd of passengers from Rayford, but as soon as he turned to the right the lane lay white and smooth between its high hedges. Such, at least, was his impression until he crossed to the other side in search of a firmer path, when he found that someone had been that way before him, and quite recently. There was nothing really strange in this, except that he fancied the foot-prints were a woman's, and, by the position and impression of them, he judged that she had been running. The lane was a lonely one for a woman at that hour of the night, and it was hardly wonderful that she should run to get to her journey's end as soon as possible. The weird light over the snow made it possible to see some little distance ahead in spite of the black sky above, but he could discern no one, and, being curious to know what manner of woman she was, he quickened his pace. The lane turned and twisted considerably, and he suddenly came upon her, standing not ten yards in front of him. She had evidently been running, and had stopped for a moment to get her breath. She turned sharply as he approached, feeling his presence rather than hearing him.

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'I am afraid I startled you,' he said, raising his hat.

'You did.'

'I am sorry. Let me assure you I am as harmless and benighted a pedestrian as you are.'

The tone of his voice and his light laugh were reassuring.

'I ought to have been home at least four hours ago,' she said; 'but there was an accident somewhere on the line, and I could not get back from Rayford earlier.'

'I am late for the same reason. Does home mean Dean?'

'Yes.'

'Then, may I suggest that we go on together? It is not a pleasant walk for you alone.'

She hesitated.

'I admit the unconventionality of the proposal,' he said. 'Let me introduce myself. I am on my way to my uncle, Mr. Quixley of the Gate House; my name is Ralph Cunningham. You may possibly have heard of me.'

'I know there is such a person as Mr. Ralph Cunningham.'

'And he is very much at your service,' he said. 'Shall we go on—it is cold standing.'

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They walked on briskly ; she was glad of the companionship.

'Did Mr. Quixley send for you?' she asked presently.

'I hardly know. The butler wrote to me asking me to come down. My uncle is rather an eccentric person, as you may have heard.'

'Everybody in Dean knows that, but—are you aware that Mr. Quixley is dying?'

'The butler said so in his letter, or I should not be here, Miss——'

He paused.

'I am Miss Wingfield. You need not think about the name, for I am certain you have never heard of me,' and she laughed, a little ripple of music very pleasant to listen to.

'I do not think I have,' Cunningham answered. 'No, Miss Wingfield, I should not be here unless the letter had been urgent. I have only been to the Gate House once before in my life, and on that occasion my welcome was anything but cordial.'

'Your own fault, perhaps?'

'I can honestly say it was not.'

'I know he is peculiar,' said the girl ; 'but I rather like Mr. Quixley. People are so much alike, especially in a sleepy place like Dean, it

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is refreshing to come upon somebody absolutely different from anyone else.'

'Do you know much of my uncle?'

'Very little.'

'Some of his peculiarities are not pleasant, Miss Wingfield. After a dose of my uncle I found it refreshing to get back to the commonplace people.'

'You will certainly not get a cordial welcome to-night; in fact, I do not think you will get into the house.'

'It is a pleasant night to be locked out in, isn't it? I think I see a light ahead.'

'From our cottage; it is the only one just here. Listen!'

'Midnight,' Cunningham said, as the clock in Dean church-tower sounded slowly and clearly across the silence.

A few minutes' walk brought them to the gate of a large cottage which stood back from the road in a wide garden. At the sound of the gate the door was opened, and a woman stood in the entrance.

'Muriel!'

'Yes, mother,' the girl called to her. 'I am all right. Will you not come in and see my mother? She may be able to suggest some-

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thing, should the Gate House be shut against you.'

She opened the gate as she spoke, and Cunningham followed her up the path to the house.

'My dear child, where have you been, and who is this?'

'There was an accident on the line, and no trains have been running from Rayford; I began to think I should not get home at all to-night. This is Mr. Cunningham, Mr. Quixley's nephew. He caught me up in the lane, and is on his way to the Gate House now.'

'You will not get in to-night.'

'I have told him so,' said Muriel.

'I am hoping to find someone sitting up for me, as I am expected,' said Cunningham. 'I was due here quite early in the evening. Your daughter very kindly suggested that you might give me an idea where to go should I be locked out.'

'The only suggestion I can make is that you stay here.'

'That is exceedingly good of you, but I must not trespass on your kindness in that manner.'

'Either you will have to do so, or make up

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your mind to sleep under a hedge. The Gate House will certainly be closed.'

The prospect of tramping the lanes all night was not fascinating.

'Would you mind my going on to the Gate House, and, if I cannot get in, coming back?'

'Not at all.'

'Thank you so much; I shall not be long.'

He hurried down the path, and Mrs. Wingfield shut the door.

'I am afraid you have been terribly worried about me, mother.'

'Naturally, my dear child. Still, I could do nothing but wait.'

Muriel was accustomed to her mother's matter-of-fact ways.

'You did not mind my bringing Mr. Cunningham in?'

'No. Stir up the fire, Muriel. We had better wait for supper until he comes back; at least, you had—I had mine hours ago.'

'Mary has gone to bed, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'And Tramp?'

'I expect so. He has not been in the kitchen to-night. He has had one of his wandering fits to-day.'

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'Poor fellow!' said Muriel.

'He might be much worse off,' said Mrs. Wingfield; 'the loft is very warm and cosy.'

Muriel took off her boots and slipped her feet into a dainty pair of shoes.

'I suppose Mr. Quixley must be really dying, or his nephew would not have been sent for,' she said, holding out her hands to the blazing fire.

'I am told there is no hope of his recovery,' Mrs Wingfield answered.

'I wonder whether Mr. Cunningham will come into all his money?'

'I'm sure I cannot tell you, Muriel. Mr. Cunningham is, I fancy, his nearest, if not his only relation. This young man seems to interest you.'

'I do not know that he interests me exactly, but I was very glad of his company to-night.' And then, after a pause, she went on: 'It would be a shame if Mr. Quixley did not leave his money to him.'

'There may be others who have more right to it,' said her mother. 'Money is amassed in curious ways sometimes, many suffering for the enrichment of one, and, if report speaks truly, Mr. Quixley's money is none of the cleanest.'

'You always speak of him, mother, as if you knew something against him.'

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'You are fanciful, my dear. Much of my judgment is based on what I have heard Mr. Quixley say himself. I must go and see that the room is ready for Mr. Cunningham.'

Presently Cunningham returned. 'I have come to trespass upon you, Mrs. Wingfield. The Gate House was locked fast as a prison, and there is no bell at the gate with which to arouse the sleepers, even had one the courage to use it.'

'Come to the fire,' said Muriel. 'You do not regret my suggestion?'

'No, nor that I startled you in the lane. I am also glad that the Gate House was shut.'

The round table drawn close to the fire was comfortable, and even when supper was over they did not seem inclined to go to bed.

Cunningham smoked a cigar at Mrs. Wingfield's request, and he found himself talking to Muriel as though they were friends of long standing instead of acquaintances of a few hours only. When he had overtaken her in the lane, she was huddled up in a heavy cloak, the collar turned up to her ears, and her skirts were held high to keep them out of the snow. Her utter loneliness had been her chief attraction to him then. Now that he sat beside her, a privileged companion, he recognised that she was a very

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pretty and extremely attractive girl. She was cast in a dainty mould, and both in repose and when laughter dimpled her cheeks her face was charming, ever changing with some new beauty of expression, now of merriment, and now of thought. Her warm brown hair was gathered loosely round her head, the apparent carelessness of its arrangement being its art, and stray little curls, which required constantly pushing back, would fall upon her forehead. Her gray eyes, fringed with long dark lashes, were half pleading, half defiant; and her mouth, closed firmly, suggested strength of will. Her beauty was certainly not inherited from her mother, who was of a larger and coarser type, but much of her character she certainly had. Her mother's force of will was hers, although she had not her physical strength.

So pleasant was Muriel to look at and to talk to that Cunningham's cigar lasted considerably longer than it would have done under ordinary circumstances; but it was finished at last, and there was no excuse for sitting up any longer.

'I will say good-bye now instead of good-night, Mr. Cunningham,' said Muriel. 'I am sure I shall not be able to get up early to-morrow.'

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'At what time do they open the Gate House?'

'About six o'clock. When he is well, Mr. Quixley is usually out by that time, and often does not stir out of the house for the rest of the day. I wonder what he does with himself?'

'Sits counting his money, perhaps. I believe he has plenty of it.'

'Gossip may exaggerate,' said Mrs. Wingfield. 'A man need not be very rich to pass as wealthy in Dean.'

'At any rate, his money does not concern me,' said Cunningham. 'I am not a favourite of his, and I do not expect even a legacy. Good-night, Miss Wingfield.'

'Good-bye. Thank you so much for taking care of me.'

'It is not really good-bye; we are certain to meet again.'

He held her hand a moment longer than was absolutely necessary, and then, taking his candle, followed Mrs. Wingfield to his room.

When Mrs. Wingfield came down again Muriel had gone to bed. She glanced at the clock. It was ten minutes to two, but she was in no hurry. She cleared the table leisurely and put out the lamp, but she did not go to bed. She sat in front

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of the fire staring into the dying embers, her hands folded in her lap, her face set. For half an hour she sat there motionless; then she got up and went into the passage, and stood for a moment listening. Not a sound disturbed the silence in the house. Hastily putting on a cloak, she passed out through a back-door into the garden, and went quickly towards a row of sheds which stood in one corner at the bottom. She opened a door quietly. A dull glow came from a stove at the end of the shed.

'Tramp!'

'Ay,' answered a voice out of the darkness, and a figure moved by the stove.

'You have been wandering all day?'

'Ay, all day. The old fever was on me.'

'How long have you been back?'

'Maybe an hour—maybe two.'

'You must start at dawn.'

'Before,' was the laconic answer.

'There are the keys.'

The man took them and dropped them into his pocket.

'You have loaded the cart, I see.'

'Yes, since I came back.'

'You will deliver everything as usual,' said Mrs. Wingfield, and she laid her hand upon the

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man's shoulder for a moment. Then she left the shed, closing the door softly behind her.

As she recrossed the garden, she looked up at the window of her guest's room.

'Dark—all asleep,' she said to herself, and she shivered a little.

A keen wind was blowing from the east. It was bitterly cold.

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CHAPTER II

THE EMPTY ROOM

To those living in and around Dean, the Gate House had a history; to the stranger it was merely an object of curiosity. The inhabitants of Dean knew that it got its name from the fact that a turnpike-gate once stood there—a gate, too, around which legend had clustered thickly. In the legend there were highwaymen, a brutal gate-keeper, and officers of the King; and there was a murder, but as to who was the victim and who the criminal the legend was not clear. Of one thing, however, the legend was certain—ill-luck must always attend the residence which had risen on the site of the old gate house, and whoever had the temerity to live there. The stranger saw only an ugly square stone house, set in the midst of old trees and surrounded by a high stone wall. He wondered what manner of man

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he was who chose to live in such a depressing-looking place.

Stephen Quixley was eccentric, and was believed to be enormously rich. On what grounds his reputation for wealth rested it was difficult to say, but there was no doubt of his eccentricity. He visited no one, nor did any of his neighbours visit him. At six o'clock every morning the gate in the high stone wall was opened, and at sundown it was closed, after which time it was impossible to get in, as there was no bell, and all communication with the house was cut off. Little was really known of Mr. Quixley. He had bought the Gate House some years ago, but who he was or where he had come from nobody knew. If their master had any secret to keep, the servants were either as ignorant of it as the rest of the world, or found it to their advantage not to speak of it.

It was a bright morning as Ralph Cunningham walked up to the house. Frost had hardened the snow during the night, and the keen air had the effect of a tonic. On such a morning it was easy for a healthy young man to face the future and all its possible ills with equanimity.

The gate was open, and he went to the front-door. The bell jangled for some seconds in a distant part of the house before the bolts were

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drawn and the door slowly opened by an old man, with sparse hair at the sides of his head, and a figure bent almost double.

'Well, Jervons?'

'Mr. Cunningham! Come in, sir. I'm glad to see you.'

Cunningham entered and waited until the door was closed again.

'Thank you for your welcome, Jervons; but how about my uncle? Will he be pleased to see me?'

'Depends how he feels this morning,' was the answer. 'You mustn't take too much notice of his ways, sir. I've a notion that he's fond of you at heart. Give me your bag, sir, and come this way. You'll be wanting some breakfast.'

'I have had it,' Cunningham said as he followed the old man into a morning-room. 'The fact is, I arrived late last night and found myself shut out. There was an accident on the line.'

'You've never been walking about all night?'

'No. Mrs. Wingfield kindly took me in.'

'Oh, ah, I know Mrs. Wingfield—a pleasant lady, with a rather good-looking slip of a girl for a daughter.'

'Exactly, Jervons,' Cunningham said, not

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thinking the description of Muriel at all suitable. 'And how is my uncle?'

'He's a wonderful man, sir, pretty near as old as I am, and looks young enough to be my son at times. He was better yesterday; but when I wrote to you he was dying. We all thought so, and I sent for a doctor. When the doctor came the master said he wouldn't see him, and he didn't. He's been very bad this time, Mr. Cunningham—worse than I ever see him.'

'He did not suggest that you should send for me?'

'I can't say he did in so many words. I mentioned your name to him one morning when he seemed very bad, and he wanted to know whether I thought he was going to die. "Because I'm not," says he. "When I'm dying you can send for my nephew." Well, the next day we thought he was dying, and I sent for you.'

'I dare say you will be forgiven, Jervons, but I have grave doubts of my welcome. Is my uncle awake yet?'

'He wasn't just before you came in, but I'll go and knock at his door again. It is locked. He must have got out of bed and locked it after I left him last night.'

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'There are more books in this room than ever, Jervons.'

'Yes, sir; the cases have been heightened quite recently.'

'A curious collection,' said Cunningham, looking along the shelves. 'Does my uncle ever read any of them, I wonder?'

'Some of those in his own room he does, because I've seen him. He has his bed in his study now—has done for some time.'

'Why is that?'

'Just fancy,' answered the butler. 'He lives in that room almost entirely.'

'Well, Jervons, the house will not hold much more.'

'No, sir, it would seem not; but it's a stretchable sort of house, as one might say. Large boxes of books and things constantly arrive, and the master manages to stow them away. I'll go and see if he is awake.'

However dreary the Gate House might look outside, there was no lack of comfort within, although it was of a peculiar kind. Books were everywhere. The room in which Cunningham stood was lined with them—books of all descriptions, upon every conceivable subject, and in almost every language. They were neatly arranged,

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but upon what system it was impossible to tell. In the square hall there were books in cases, above which the walls were covered with pictures, oil-paintings, water-colours, prints, hung without any regard to taste or light, interspersed here and there with old weapons and pieces of armour. And up the staircase were more books, more pictures, and pieces of dusty-looking old tapestry. Every room in the house that Cunningham had ever been into was the same. The place was nothing less than a huge curiosity shop, containing some things of value, doubtless, but a vast amount of rubbish.

In a few moments Jervons returned.

'He's not awake yet, sir.'

'I suppose he is all right?' said Cunningham.

That there could be any doubt of this was evidently a new idea to the butler. He opened his eyes a little wider, but did not speak.

'What time did you leave him last night, Jervons?'

'I took him some gruel about five o'clock, and he told me not to go back again.'

'Five o'clock!' exclaimed Cunningham, looking at his watch. 'It is ten now. By Jove! he ought not to have been left so long. We must

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make certain that he is all right, Jervons. How about the window?'

'I closed the shutters as usual when I lit the lamp.'

'He may have opened them.'

'We can go and see, sir.'

Jervons, trembling a little, led the way to a back-door and round the house to the study window. On this side the house was only some ten or fifteen yards from the high stone wall, and the study looked out upon this dead prospect. Indeed, it looked into a kind of walled yard, for on one side the house projected, and on the other was the wall of a passage which Cunningham knew led from his uncle's room to a door in the outer wall. It was a dreary prospect for a room constantly in use. The shutters of the room were still closed.

'We shall have to break open the door, Jervons.'

'Oh, the master wouldn't like that,' said the butler.

'Nonsense, man! He has been alone for seventeen hours. Try and find me something heavy with which to force the door.'

Cunningham returned to the house and went to his uncle's room. He knocked, softly at first,

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then loudly, and shouted to him. There was no answer, nor any sound within.

Jervons brought a crowbar, but he was very anxious that it should not be used.

'I'm sure the master wouldn't like it, sir.'

'I am only too afraid that he is past liking or disliking anything, Jervons,' Cunningham said, as he took the crowbar and attacked the door.

It was not an easy matter to force the door open, for it was a stout one; but it yielded at last, and fell open with a crash, carrying part of the jamb with it.

The room was dark and silent, save for the low ticking of a watch. For a moment Cunningham stood upon the threshold trying to discern what was within.

'Open the shutters, Jervons,' he whispered. 'You know the room better than I do.'

The butler shuffled past him. It seemed a long time before the shutters opened slowly, Jervons turning to look at the bed as he pulled them back.

A startled, half-stifled cry escaped his lips. No figure, dead or living, lay there.

The room was empty!

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CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY OF THE GATE HOUSE

CUNNINGHAM fully expected to find himself in the presence of death, pathetic perhaps, or perchance dreadful, in its aspect; but somehow the reality seemed even worse, because of the air of mystery in it, the sense of the unknown.

The bedclothes were thrown back naturally, as they would be by a person rising from the bed. On a small table at the bedside was the empty gruel basin, and an old-fashioned watch and chain, with some loose silver and copper coins near it. There was a candlestick, too, the candle having burnt out, and an open book lying face downwards.

These things Cunningham noticed at a glance. Then he closed the door and put the crowbar against it to keep it shut.

'We had better just look round the room,

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Jervons, before anyone else in the house knows of this.'

The butler started. He had remained staring at the empty bed in a bewildered kind of way.

'Yes, sir. I am expecting the master to walk in any minute.'

'Perhaps so, Jervons; I hope so, but——'

'He felt better and went out, that's what it is, Mr. Cunningham. What else could have happened?'

'That is what we have got to find out,' Cunningham answered. 'Was my uncle using a candle when you left him last night?'

'No, sir; that lamp yonder was on the table then.'

'And where were his clothes?'

'On this chair.'

'Gone, you see!'

'There was an overcoat hanging in this cupboard,' said Jervons, opening the door as he spoke. 'Gone, too, sir.'

'It seems evident that my uncle got up and dressed himself—probably intended to do so when you left him last night. There is no sign of anyone else having been in the room, no sign of a struggle. He did not take his watch nor his money.'

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'But he took his keys,' said Jervons; 'they were lying on the table when I brought his gruel last night; I noticed them particularly. He took them so as he could let himself in again. He's gone out by the passage; it's the only way he could have gone, since the door was locked and the window barred.'

'I thought he never went out that way.'

'I've not known him do so before,' Jervons answered.

'What time did you go to bed last night?'

'Just after ten o'clock, sir, and I was the last.'

'And you heard nothing?'

'Nothing at all, sir.'

'Wherever your master went, he did not expect to be long,' said Cunningham. 'Apparently he left the candle burning; it burnt itself out, you see. Can we open this door into the passage?'

'Yes, sir.'

From the room the door was opened by turning the handle. It was a spring-lock, and to open it from the other side required a key. The passage was dark and dirty, and did not look as if it were much used. It was full of packing-cases and crates, some of which had not been emptied, and still contained books. So lumbered up was it

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that it was not an easy matter to get to the door at the other end. This door, like the other, could be opened from the inside, but required a key to obtain entrance.

'He must have gone this way,' said Cunningham, as he looked across the field on to which this exit from the Gate House opened. The snow had drifted against the door, and had hardened with the morning frost. The field lay white and undisturbed, not a trace of footsteps upon it.

'He went last night, Jervons,' Cunningham said; 'quite early in the evening, probably, but certainly before midnight. Had he gone later there would be some trace of him. It was hardly snowing at all at twelve o'clock, and he went early enough for the snow to have had time to cover up his tracks.'

The butler had no opinion to offer, and silently followed Cunningham back to the room.

'We will go through the house and make sure my uncle is nowhere about.'

'He couldn't be,' said Jervons decidedly. 'The front-door wasn't opened until you came this morning.'

However, the journey through the house was made, and revealed nothing. The rooms were

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crowded with books and bric-à-brac, chiefly rubbish, Cunningham thought, and had been little used, for the dust was thick everywhere. Jervons felt obliged to apologize for it, saying that his master would never have these rooms touched.

They returned to the hall.

'Well, Jervons, it is no good making any secret about it. You had better tell the other servants at once. How many of you are there in the house?'

'Five, counting me and the wife—all women, except me, and not women as is given to talk much, neither. There's a gardener, but he lives in the village, and isn't here to-day.'

'I shall stay here to-night, Jervons. Is there a constable in the village?'

'No, sir, not nearer than Camptown, and the man what's there ain't much of a constable, I've heard.'

'Perhaps I had better go into Docksmouth,' said Cunningham. 'Fasten up the door of my uncle's room somehow, Jervons. Nothing there must be touched.'

On his way to the station Cunningham stopped at Mrs. Wingfield's cottage. After her kindness to him last night, it would be only courteous to call and tell her what had happened. It was no

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good making any secret of the affair. The more people who heard of Mr. Quixley's disappearance, the better chance would there be of finding out what had become of him. Besides, it would be pleasant to see Muriel again.

A small servant came to the door, looking several times too small for her large cap and apron.

'Is Mrs. Wingfield at home?'

'That she ain't, sir.'

'Who is that, Mary?' and Muriel came out of the room in which they had had supper last night. 'Oh, Mr. Cunningham, will you not come in? Mother went to Docksmouth this morning.'

'I am on my way there. I may meet her,' said Cunningham, following Muriel into the room. 'A curious thing has happened at the Gate House, Miss Wingfield. Mr. Quixley has gone.'

'Gone! Do you mean he is dead?'

'I do not know what has happened to him. He has disappeared. I broke open the door of his room this morning, and found the room empty.'

'But I thought he had been confined to his bed for some days past?'

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'So he has. He was in bed when the butler left him last evening.'

And Cunningham told her all that had occurred.

'Where can he have gone to?'

'I cannot imagine. Everything seems to point to the probability that he left his room of his own accord, with a set purpose, and apparently in no hurry. I do not think he meant to be away long.'

'Are the servants trustworthy?' Muriel asked.

'I feel convinced they are. Old Jervons is the only man in the house.'

'Mr. Quixley was always eccentric,' said Muriel. 'I expect he will come back.'

Cunningham shook his head gravely.

'Or perhaps he has gone out of the way to annoy you,' she suggested. 'You said you were not a favourite of his, and it seems certain that he was not so ill as he was supposed to be.'

'That might be a solution had he known that I was coming, but he did not know. I am going to Docksmouth to see a solicitor I know there, and I suppose we must put the matter into the hands of the police. It is a most mysterious affair. I cannot tell you why, but somehow I do not expect to see my uncle again.'

'You think he left the Gate House last night?' said Muriel thoughtfully.

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'Yes.'

'It would have been strange if you had met him when you went up to the Gate House to find yourself locked out.'

'I think I should have believed in ghosts immediately, Miss Wingfield.'

'I think he will come back,' said Muriel after a pause. 'I cannot give a reason any more than you can; but I cannot believe that Mr. Quixley has gone out of our lives altogether.'

'Our lives!'

'Yes, all our lives. He was a personality in Dean, you know—quite different from anyone else in the place. And we have always given him credit for being connected with a mystery of some kind.'

'Anyone living at the Gate House would naturally earn that reputation. Have you ever been inside the house, Miss Wingfield?'

'Once, when I went to pay the rent on one occasion for mother. She has a fancy to pay it always at mid-day on the quarter-day. I remember Mr. Quixley laughing about it. He is a funny little man. He would have it that I was an abnormally tall young woman because he was shorter than I was. I like Mr. Quixley.'

'The fact is much in his favour,' Cunningham

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returned. 'I must go. I shall have a lonely walk along the lane this time. You will tell your mother that I called, and all about Mr. Quixley.'

Muriel watched him down the lane, and he turned and raised his hat. The little maid was a witness of this from the back-yard, and in her excitement accomplished two or three steps of a dance. She was of a romantic nature, romance culled from stray numbers of a weird penny publication which sometimes found its way to Dean, and wherein the most unlikely of heroines invariably married titles of the highest degree. Mary had a vague idea that this was real life, and the life she knew nothing more than a local mistake. Miss Muriel was quite beautiful enough to be a Princess in disguise, and the stranger going down the lane was a mystery.

Mrs. Wingfield returned home earlier than Muriel expected.

'Did you meet Mr. Cunningham, mother?'

'No.'

'Have you heard that Mr. Quixley has disappeared?'

'Disappeared!' exclaimed Mrs. Wingfield. 'What do you mean, child?'

'He has gone. Mr. Cunningham broke open the door of his room this morning, and found

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the room empty. Mr. Quixley is not at the Gate House.'

Mrs. Wingfield took off her bonnet and cloak thoughtfully.

'One of his tricks, I suppose. What does Mr. Cunningham think about it?'

'He thinks he is dead.'

'Why should he think so?'

'He cannot give any reason, neither can I for believing that he will come back. I cannot think Mr. Quixley has gone out of our lives.'

'He was never a part of them, Muriel.'

'Somehow, he has always seemed to be,' the girl answered.

'For goodness' sake do not get such foolish fancies into your head. He is our landlord, and there our association with him ends. In a short time that will end, too.'

'How, mother?'

'I am going to give up this cottage, Muriel.'

'Oh, mother!'

'There are several reasons for doing so,' said Mrs. Wingfield. 'Even selling the garden stuff as I do, I spend more than the place is worth.'

'I thought you did so well.'

'I have been hopeful sometimes, Muriel, that is all; besides, you are absolutely buried in Dean.'

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'I like it,' Muriel answered.

'I must think of your future. I hope to see you married some day, and I know of no desirable person in Dean.'

'And in what part of the world am I to have my opportunities?'

'We are going to live in Docksmouth for a time. I had not intended to go just yet, but this affair of Mr. Quixley's will hasten matters.'

'But if he comes back?'

'We shall still go to Docksmouth,' answered Mrs. Wingfield.

'And what are you going to do with Tramp?'

'He will remain with us if I can possibly manage it. He may be able to do odd jobs for Mrs. Chenneby.'

'Have you found a house?'

'I am in treaty for one; nothing is settled yet.'

'Why have you not told me of this before, mother?'

'My dear child, have I ever discussed business with you? Of course, there is no reason why I should not have done so; but all my life I have been accustomed to act and think for myself. I did as a girl, I did when I married your father—I am too old to change now. And, Muriel, there is another thing: I do not want our going talked

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about, nor people to know where we are going. To those in Dean we have been just simple folk like themselves. But in Docksmouth I intend it to be understood that, although poor, we have a position to keep up. The less Mrs. Wingfield of Dean is associated with us, the better.'

'My dear mother is becoming proud,' said Muriel, smiling.

'Only wise, Muriel. I want to see you in the position which is yours by right—the position you would have occupied had all gone well with your father. Is Mr. Cunningham coming in again?'

'I hope so—at least, I dare say he will. He has gone to Docksmouth to see a solicitor, and to put the case of Mr. Quixley into the hands of the police.'

'It is a strange thing how the legend concerning the Gate House seems to be true,' said Mrs. Wingfield presently. 'It says ill-luck shall attend everyone who lives there.'

'Surely you do not believe such nonsense?'

'I hardly know. So many of these coincidences, as people call them, happen, it seems worse than foolish to laugh at them. To both the previous owners of the Gate House tragic things have happened. In one case two children

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fell from the staircase into the hall, and were killed on the spot; in the other the husband was found dead in the study by the servants when they opened the room one morning, and his wife was tried for her life for the murder.'

'Was she guilty?'

'The law found her innocent.'

The noisy clatter of a tray behind them made them both start. Mary, bringing in the tea, had heard what her mistress said, and stood there trembling with excitement.

'What is the matter, Mary?'

'Oh, please, mum, what you was saying? Has anything happened to Mr. Quixley?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because, mum—I couldn't help it, mum—but I had a dream.'

'You have been reading one of those rubbishy papers again.'

'Yes, mum, but it wasn't that. There was nothing about murder in the paper.'

'Murder!' exclaimed Muriel.

'Yes, miss, that's what I dreamt about. I dreamt somebody had murdered Mr. Quixley.'

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CHAPTER IV

MARK OLROYD OF DOCKSMOUTH

Docksmouth was rather an indefinite kind of town. In recent years the suburbs of it had developed into a favourite watering-place, and had become more important than the town itself, with the result that Docksmouth proper was sleepy, much like an old man resting after a life of strenuous labour. It had been, was still in name, a large shipping centre; but now the railway ran right down to the quays, missing the town, whilst people coming there for pleasure alighted at West Docksmouth, and very probably went home again without penetrating into the real town at all.

There was a forlorn appearance about many of the shops in the High Street. They were too large for the trade they were ever likely to do, and the Blue Lion, which had been a famous inn

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for generations, and given shelter to soldiers and politicians of the past, must have felt ashamed of many of the guests who now frequented it. The old houses in the street looked proud and poor. Many a handsome room did they contain with ceilings, oak panelling, and carved chimney-pieces to delight the soul of a connoisseur. In the past they had been the homes of the wealthy; now they often sheltered two or three families of such radical tendencies that, in order to set a fire burning to boil a kettle, they would have torn down a carved panel without the slightest compunction.

On the doorpost of one of these houses was a brass plate with the name, 'Olroyd, Newton and Olroyd, Solicitors. And in London'; and on the ground-floor were the offices of this well-known and eminent firm. The father Olroyd (there was no Newton now) was chiefly concerned with the business in London; Olroyd the son looked after the local business.

Mark Olroyd sat in his private room, a cigar between his teeth, which he chewed rather than smoked, and a huge ledger lay open on the table before him. The contemplation of certain figures therein gave him small satisfaction. He looked troubled, and the comparison between these

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figures and certain others in a note-book which he took from his pocket seemed to cause him something like consternation.

'It requires a miracle to do it,' he said. 'And how is that miracle to happen?'

A clerk brought him a card.

'Oh, show him in,' said Olroyd, replacing the note-book in his pocket and closing the ledger. 'Cunningham, by all that's wonderful! What has brought you to Docksmouth?'

'Business, Olroyd, and queer business, too,' said Cunningham, shaking hands. They were old friends, these two.

'I am engaged if anyone calls,' Olroyd said, turning to the clerk.

'You made an appointment with Mr. Biedermann this afternoon, sir.'

'Let me know when he comes. Well, Cunningham, is the queer business in my line?'

'Yes. I have an uncle living at Dean; you may have heard of him—Stephen Quixley of the Gate House?'

'I have heard of Mr. Quixley, but I did not know he had the honour of being your uncle.'

'He mysteriously disappeared last night,' said Cunningham.

'Disappeared!' The expression on Olroyd's

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face changed. Perhaps he was conscious of it and did not want his companion to notice it, for he got up and went to the mantelpiece, returning with a box of cigars in his hand. 'Have a smoke, and tell me all about it.'

Cunningham settled himself in his chair and told him everything.

'Mr. Quixley was eccentric, wasn't he?' said Olroyd.

'Very.'

'Might possibly go away for the sake of making a sensation?'

'He might; but I do not think that is the solution of the mystery.'

'Why did you not wake them up when you went to the Gate House last night?'

'I couldn't. There is nothing to wake them up with. When the gate in the wall is closed there is no means of communicating with the house.'

'Do you know much about your uncle—about his past, I mean?'

'Hardly anything. He and his relations usually quarrelled when they met, I believe, so for some years they have dropped one another's acquaintance. I think I am now the only relation he has got.'

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'And he was rich?' Olroyd remarked.

'People say so. Personally I know nothing about his affairs. Have you ever done any business for him?'

'A little at odd times, but nothing lately. Let me see, when did I see him last?'

'Evidently the business you did for him was not very important,' said Cunningham, with a smile.

'I remember. About a year ago he came to see me about his will.'

'You made it for him?'

'No; he had made it already. He came to ask me whether it was all in order. It was, and he signed it in this room. Two of my clerks witnessed it, I think. I will ask Hudson.'

The bell rang and a clerk came in.

'Ask Mr. Hudson to come here.'

When Mr. Hudson appeared, he listened to the question with an exceedingly solemn expression upon his face, as though very much hung upon his answer. He put his fingers through his hair much as if he were raking his brains together to do the necessary amount of thinking.

'Yes, sir,' he said presently, 'I witnessed it, and so did Mr. Biedermann. There was nobody else in the office just then, and you couldn't write

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at the time, if you remember. You had your arm in a sling after that fall you had from your horse.'

'So I had. That would be about eighteen months ago, wouldn't it?'

'Just about.'

'Thank you, Hudson.'

'Do you remember the terms of the will?' Cunningham asked, when Hudson had gone.

Olroyd smiled.

'I cannot say I do. I am not exercising professional reticence. I mean it. You see, we did not draft the will here, and I was not particularly interested.'

'No, of course not.'

'I do not think your name could have been mentioned in it, or I should have remembered it.'

'That does not surprise me, nor am I disappointed. He probably left his money to somebody I have never heard of.'

'Mr. Quixley took the will away with him. Have you come across it?'

'No. I want to put the whole business in your hands, Olroyd. We must communicate with the police, I suppose?'

'I think so. Mr. Quixley may come back; but

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if not, the sooner the police know all about it, the better.'

'I shall not be able to remain at the Gate House,' said Cunningham; 'so I shall tell the police to communicate with you.'

'I presume, then, that this—what shall we call her?—this lady of the lane is not very attractive?' said Olroyd.

'On the contrary, Miss Wingfield is decidedly attractive.'

'Miss Wingfield! You did not mention her name before.'

Olroyd looked at his companion keenly, and would perhaps have questioned him further had not a clerk announced that Mr. Biedermann was waiting.

'Then, I will not keep you any longer,' said Cunningham. 'I will go to the police, and I shall see you again in a day or two.'

Mr. Biedermann walked into the private room with his hat on, and took a cigar from the box on the table without invitation.

'Well, Olroyd, what news?'

'You came expecting none?'

'Perhaps.'

'Then, you are doomed to disappointment.'

'That's right. Has the gentleman who just went out got anything to do with it?'

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'Nothing whatever. Is it absolutely necessary to pay this money?'

'If you want the securities returned, it is.'

'I do; but I can give others.'

Biedermann shook his head.

'I don't like the game, Olroyd.'

'No?'

'It's a bit too dangerous, and I want to get out of it.'

'Pardon me, Biedermann; you do not quite understand my meaning. I am dealing with my own property. Do you suppose I should use securities in any way for which I had no authority?'

'Candidly, I did suppose so.'

'Judgment by your own standard of morality,' said Olroyd, with a sneer. 'Let it pass; you were mistaken. I want the securities your people hold, and I will replace them with others.'

'Why not sell your own and settle the whole business?'

'An excellent suggestion, Biedermann, but it is not good business to sell at a low price.' He pointed to the figures in the money article. 'That is the quotation to-day—a temporary depression, you see. Can you manage the business for me, or shall I arrange it elsewhere?'

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'It can be done, I expect.'

'I am sure of it. I will write for the securities which are in London. It is my intention to settle the whole business as soon as the bonds touch their proper value.'

'Very well, I will arrange the matter.'

Mr. Biedermann took his departure, wondering whether Olroyd had told him the truth or not. He rather thought not. He had formed his opinion of Olroyd long ago, and he was troubled at having to doubt of the justice of that opinion now.

Left alone, Mark Olroyd walked slowly up and down the room, his hands thrust into his pockets.

'The miracle has happened,' he said.

He opened a safe which stood in a corner of the room, and from a drawer in it took out a parcel of bonds.

'Temporarily left,' he said to himself. 'Some whim of his, and the transaction known only to him and to me—point one in my favour. A long delay in proving the will if he is not found—point two in my favour. The will!' He replaced the bonds and took a book from his table drawer and scanned its pages carefully. His finger stopped at a certain entry. 'Point three,' he said; 'an

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unknown quantity as yet, but Mark Olroyd is a personage in Docksmouth. Such a proposal should be a temptation to her. By Jove! it's the straightest road to fortune which has ever presented itself to me. I hold the cards. I fancy I am smart enough to play them.'

There was a great deal of evil in Olroyd's face as he selected another cigar.

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CHAPTER V

MRS. WINGFIELD IS TAKEN ILL

THE inhabitants of Dean were of the sober, phlegmatic order, not given to be unduly aroused or excited under any circumstances whatever. The disappearance of Mr. Quixley gave rise to two opinions. The landlord of the small tavern in the village observed that he had always expected something of the kind would happen, seeing what the reputation of the Gate House was; and Mrs. Ford, at the general shop, said that Mr. Quixley would probably come back again as mysteriously as he had disappeared, seeing what a reputation he had for eccentricity. To one of these two opinions most of the villagers inclined, and went about their daily occupations as if nothing particular had occurred.

The snow had gone completely, and one of the police theories, that the missing man's body was

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buried under it, was thus dissipated. There was no body to be found, though the hedgerows, ditches, and disused sand-pits, in the neighbourhood were thoroughly searched. No one, in spite of the reward offered, came forward to say that he had seen Mr. Quixley on the evening in question, or knew anything about him which would throw light on the mystery. Nor was anything belonging to him picked up. He had vanished as completely as the snow had done.

To those most nearly concerned there was just one point which gave a hope that Mr. Quixley might not be dead. Inquiry at the bank in Docksmouth elicited the information that, some days before his illness, Mr. Quixley had drawn from his account five thousand five hundred pounds, of which four hundred pounds was in gold. The bank said their customer had drawn such a sum on two or three former occasions, and stated that they believed it was Mr. Quixley's practice when buying securities to pay the brokers in cash. Further inquiry proved this to be the case. Bank of England notes to the value of five thousand one hundred pounds had been paid to a firm of stockbrokers in London for the purchase of certain bearer bonds which Mr. Quixley had taken away with him. There was, therefore, a

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sum of four hundred pounds in gold unaccounted for. So far as Jervons knew, his master had made no such large payment recently, but neither the bonds nor the money were to be found at the Gate House. Mr. Quixley, therefore, had plenty of gold for his wants if he meant to remain in hiding for a time, and the police were inclined to think that this was what had happened.

'The old master will come back, Mr. Cunningham,' said Jervons decidedly. 'If he'd been dead, he'd have been found by this time. A body's a body, and a body's a mighty difficult thing to get rid of.'

'Somehow it has been got rid of, Jervons.'

'I mean a dead body—a corpse, Mr. Cunningham. A living one can walk away and not come back, but a dead one——'

And the butler shook his head wisely, as though further discussion would be futile. He had proved the case to his own entire satisfaction.

The same argument was used by Muriel Wingfield, who, like Jervons, fully believed that Mr. Quixley was alive.

Ralph Cunningham had made several journeys between London and Dean, although there was really nothing for him to do. The whole affair was in Mark Olroyd's hands, who was at the

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Gate House constantly, and had charge of all Mr. Quixley's effects. Cunningham had to admit to himself that it was pleasant coming to Dean, and the unsolved mystery formed an excellent excuse. He visited Mrs. Wingfield's cottage frequently, and whatever other people may have thought of these constant visits, two persons at least considered them important. Mark Olroyd was one ; the diminutive housemaid Mary was the other.

Mark Olroyd was not of a romantic nature—solicitors seldom are—but Muriel Wingfield attracted him, and caused him in a matter-of-fact way to contemplate matrimony, a state of existence which, until now, he had been wont to scoff at. During his visits to the Gate House he had easily found an opportunity of making himself known to Mrs. Wingfield, and hoped presently to improve his acquaintance with her daughter. Mark Olroyd of Docksmouth was no mean match for a girl in Muriel Wingfield's position, and he meant to marry her. Most men would have made the mental reservation of 'if possible,' but Olroyd did not do so. He had made up his mind, and, whatever means he had to use, he meant to succeed. The growing intimacy between Cunningham and Muriel was therefore distasteful

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to him, and he was ever watchful for an opportunity of putting a stop to it.

'You might have looked after your uncle's affairs yourself,' he said to Cunningham one day when they met at the Gate House; 'you are here so constantly.'

'My dear Olroyd, I am not a solicitor. When a layman attempts to do his own legal business, he almost invariably comes to grief.'

They were in Mr. Quixley's study. The bed had been removed now, and Olroyd always used this room when he came to the Gate House.

'Then, why do you come down so often?'

'Perhaps to keep an eye on you.'

He spoke so seriously that Olroyd looked up at him.

'Oh, I see, a joke at my expense. But, seriously, why do you?'

'The country is so very beautiful, and I have little to do in town just now. Two excellent reasons, aren't they?'

'But not the right ones. However, it is no business of mine.' Then, after a pause, he went on, 'Your uncle's affairs are in a somewhat mixed state.'

'I am not surprised to hear it. Was he as rich as people imagine?'

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'I think not. He seems to have considered the books and curios in the house of considerable value, and quantities of the stuff he bought do not appear to be here at all.'

'Have you spoken to Jervons about it?'

'He knows nothing.'

'Well, I cannot help you,' said Cunningham. 'He may have sold some of the stuff again.'

'I can find no note of any such transaction. You are not going?' said Olroyd, as Cunningham rose from his chair.

'Look at the sunlight, my dear fellow. I didn't come down here to stay indoors.'

'Wait one minute, then. There is one thing I want to tell you. I cannot find the will, nor can I find any trace of those bonds.'

Cunningham seated himself on the edge of the table.

'He may have deposited them somewhere for safe custody.'

'Had he done so, he would probably have given them either to me or to the bank.'

'What is your real opinion, Olroyd? Do you think Mr. Quixley is dead?'

'I am very doubtful about it. He may be keeping out of the way.'

'With what motive?'

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'He was always eccentric,' said Olroyd, 'and I think the fact is worth your consideration, Cunningham.'

'How can it possibly affect me? You know that I am not mentioned in the will.'

'He may have destroyed the will he brought to me, or, if he is alive, intends to destroy it under certain conditions. He may wish to see what manner of man you are.'

'What idea have you got hold of now?'

'He may wish to judge whether you are worthy, according to his notions, of inheriting his money. You will forgive my saying it, Cunningham, but being here so often may give the impression that you are eagerly waiting to step into the dead man's shoes.'

Cunningham laughed. 'If he is in hiding in the hope of seeing me play the hypocrite, he is wasting his time.'

'There is another contingency,' said Olroyd.

'What is that?'

'If Mr. Quixley is dead, and that will is not found, you are the next-of-kin.'

'Yes, I suppose so; but the fact does not cause me any kind of sensation. I have never expected any money from my uncle, and I shall not experience a moment's disappointment if the will

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is found. I fully expect it will be. I am going out.'

'By the way, Cunningham, I have a lot of work I want to get through here: shall you mind if I stay at the Gate House to-morrow night, and perhaps the next night? I shall not be able to be here much next week.'

'Do, by all means. I shall be glad of your company.'

Olroyd smiled as Cunningham left the room, and went on sorting the papers on the table. Then the smile died out of his face and left a frown there. He could not get on with his work.

'I wish he would stay in town for a little while,' he said aloud. 'He is terribly in the way at present.'

He lit a cigar and stood at the window contemplating the dead wall. It reminded him of his own position. He knew there was a pleasant prospect on the other side of the wall; there was a pleasant prospect before him if he could only make a start upon the journey towards it. Suddenly he turned and walked up and down the room excitedly.

'It is possible, quite possible,' he said. 'A man may be honest in all things, but when money tempts—— Ah! the law is full of cases

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of men turning dishonest then; and why not Cunningham, perhaps with the connivance of old Jervons? There is a good deal of secretiveness about old Jervons, and he is fond of Cunningham. Suppose Cunningham were tempted, would he destroy the will, I wonder? Hardly. He would wait. He seemed very confident that it would be found. Why should he be? The thing seems more than possible—it seems probable.'

A knock at the door interrupted his train of thoughts, and Jervons entered.

'Can Mrs. Wingfield see you, sir?'

'Certainly. Ask her to come in.'

Here was an opportunity which might be turned to good account.

'I must apologize for troubling you,' said Mrs. Wingfield as Jervons closed the door behind her; 'but Mr. Cunningham told me you had all Mr. Quixley's affairs in hand, and I have come upon a little matter of business.'

'Pray sit down,' said Olroyd.

'You know I rent my cottage from Mr. Quixley. Some time ago I told him that I intended to leave Dean, and he very kindly said that I could go at any time. I suppose the arrangement will still hold good? I am not much of a business woman, Mr. Olroyd.'

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Muriel would have been amused to hear her mother say so.

'I came across the agreement the other day,' said Olroyd. 'You are at perfect liberty to go when you like.'

'If I pay the rent up to the next quarter-day, I can go at any time between this and then?'

'Certainly.'

'My moving will not be a great business,' Mrs. Wingfield went on. 'A large part of the furniture in the cottage belongs to Mr. Quixley; I have very little there.'

'So I saw by the agreement. Are you leaving the neighbourhood altogether?'

'Eventually, yes, but perhaps not just at present. You see, Mr. Olroyd, I have my daughter to think of.'

'Exactly.'

'Dean is hardly the place to further the prospects of a young girl.'

'And is she glad to go?'

'Why not?'

'If you will allow me to say so, Mrs. Wingfield, your daughter appears to me a very attractive girl. It seems impossible that she should not have had the opportunity of forming some attachment in Dean.'

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'Oh, Mr. Olroyd, with whom?'

'That I cannot guess.'

'You possibly do not know the inhabitants of Dean.'

'Not many of them.'

Mrs. Wingfield laughed.

'There is no one I should consent to Muriel marrying in Dean, and I do not think she would do anything without my consent. There is the money for the rent, Mr. Olroyd, and I understand I can send you the keys of the cottage when I choose.'

'Whenever you like. I will give you a receipt.'

'Thank you. This room is very hot, isn't it?'

'I had not noticed it. You are not well. Let me get you a glass of wine.'

'Would it be troubling you too much?' said Mrs. Wingfield faintly.

'It is no trouble at all;' and Olroyd left the room. When he returned Mrs. Wingfield was leaning back in her chair, her eyes closed. 'I am afraid you feel faint,' he said, handing her the wine. 'I will open the window.'

'It is very foolish of me. I am better now. I do occasionally have these slight attacks.' Then, after a pause, she went on: 'Has anything further been heard of Mr. Quixley?'

'Nothing.'

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'Nor ever will be, I expect, now.'

'Perhaps not,' said Olroyd. 'Personally I doubt if he is dead.'

'Mr. Cunningham thinks he is.'

'Perhaps Mr. Cunningham hopes so,' Olroyd returned. 'He is the next-of-kin, you see.'

'Was there no will, then?'

'There was to my knowledge, but it is not to be found.'

'That is very singular,' she said.

'So singular, Mrs. Wingfield, that I do not understand it at all. I saw the will myself, although I did not make it.'

'Then, you know to whom Mr. Quixley left his money?'

'I suppose I saw the name, but I do not remember it. I know it was a stranger, and not Mr. Cunningham. I have known Cunningham for years, but, until Mr. Quixley disappeared, I had no idea they were related.'

'You speak as though you had a theory, Mr. Olroyd.'

'Hardly that, Mrs. Wingfield; but a lawyer sees more of the seamy than the other side of life, and the strangest things do happen.'

'You think it possible Mr. Cunningham may have found the will and suppressed it?'

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'Now you are endeavouring to put words into my mouth, Mrs. Wingfield. There is the receipt.'

Mrs. Wingfield lost all signs of her slight fainting fit as soon as she was in the lane, and Mark Olroyd chuckled as he locked up her rent money.

'That little suspicion may bear fruit,' he said. 'She may think twice before Cunningham has her consent to marry her daughter.'

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CHAPTER VI

MARK OLROYD IS TERRIFIED

WHENEVER Mary opened the door to Ralph Cunningham she smiled knowingly, and a very large smile it was for so small a person. She lingered in the room as long as possible when bringing in tea, in the hope of hearing something, and constantly endeavoured to achieve a surprise. She gave Muriel every opportunity of making a confidante of her, without success, and she was obliged to fall back upon Tramp.

He was digging at the time.

'Was you ever in love, Mr. Tramp?'

'I don't rightly know. What be the signs?'

'You can't rest, nor you can't sleep, and you buys a revolver, and you don't know whether you'll shoot yourself or the other man.'

'I never bought a revolver.'

'Perhaps there wasn't no other man.'

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'Can't say there was, but that warn't the reason. I never had no money.'

'I'm afraid she couldn't 'a' been very lovely, Mr. Tramp, because there's always two or three after them when they're lovely.'

'Is that so?'

'Yours couldn't have been a very romantic affair, Mr. Tramp. You had her all to yourself, and they never do when it's romantic. Did you love her very much?'

'Ay, and she loved me—used to eat out of my hand.'

'Out of your hand, Mr. Tramp?'

'That she did. And then, after a bit, I couldn't afford to keep her, so me and Smiley shared her. She drew his barrow one day, and mine the next. After that I lost all my money, and had to sell her.'

'Sell her?'

'For four quid to a gent as wanted her for his kids to ride on; and he got a bargain, he did.'

'Who are you talking about?'

'My old donkey. Of who else should I be talkin' of?'

'I was talkin' of love.'

'Well, didn't I love Jinny?'

'I mean a woman,' said Mary with infinite scorn.

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'Oh, a woman!' answered Tramp, resuming his digging. 'I never had no time to worry about them.'

It was evidently hopeless to discuss romance with Tramp, so Mary was thrown back upon her penny paper, drawing comparisons between the beautiful Lady Constance and Muriel, between the handsome Sir Rupert and Ralph Cunningham, introduced a character to fit herself, and vaguely wondered where the wicked rival was to come from.

Although Mary failed entirely to interest Tramp in the love romance which she believed was unfolding around her, she managed to interest him considerably when she spoke of the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Quixley. Mary had ideas of her own upon the subject—fantastic, it is true, but the more fantastical they were the better Tramp liked them.

'Wouldn't it be a grand thing if we could discover the truth?' she said, in a whisper.

'Ay. Would there be a reward, missy? Eh?'

'One detective I knew got quite rich finding out things.'

'Did he, though?'

Mary nodded solemnly. She felt that she had

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established a bond of secrecy between Tramp and herself.

Generally, Tramp was as sane as most people, but there were occasions, at more or less frequent intervals, when he was not altogether responsible for his actions. It was during one of these lapses that he had come to Mrs. Wingfield's cottage asking for food. Believing him to be an innocent she had taken him in, had fed him before the kitchen fire, and, it being a bitterly cold evening, had let him sleep in the loft over one of the sheds at the bottom of the garden. In this lodging he had remained ever since, repaying Mrs. Wingfield's kindness with a doglike devotion. Mrs. Wingfield found him useful, and quite sharp enough for all the demands she made upon his intellect, and she became used to his roving fevers when he wandered off for two or three days sometimes. He was a silent individual, and it was impossible to say how much he understood, or in what eccentric manner any statement might impress itself on his brain. Mary had chanced to catch him when he was in the mood to listen eagerly to her story of Mr. Quixley. He said, 'Did he, though?' referring to Mary's friend, the detective, whenever he found her alone, and Mary always nodded mysteriously in answer.

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Quite unconscious of the interest the little servant took in them, Ralph Cunningham and Muriel proceeded along their pleasant path of companionship. Muriel had few friends, for Mrs. Wingfield had always kept herself apart from her neighbours, and Ralph Cunningham came into her life as a new sensation. She treated him as she would have treated a brother, and if at times she was conscious of a deeper feeling, she very vaguely understood its meaning. Ralph, with his wider experience of life, looked upon the growing intimacy in another light. He recognised why Muriel's companionship was pleasant, why the hours spent with her were the happiest of the day. He knew that he was in love with Muriel Wingfield, and, since he had never considered himself a particularly attractive man, was exceedingly doubtful of his own powers to win her. Her unreserved way of treating him, her unconcealed pleasure at his coming, did not appear to him to be signs in his favour. If she loved him as he would have her do, she would take pains to hide her feeling from him, whereas she seemed to express all the liking she had for him. One thing, however, seemed certain—he had no rival.

'I am going back to town the day after to-morrow,' he said.

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'I am sorry,' Muriel answered.

They had just finished tea, and Mrs. Wingfield was out. She was out very often when Cunningham went to the cottage, and was possibly not aware that he had been there so much.

'You are not so sorry as I am,' Ralph went on. 'I am awfully fond of Dean.'

'But you will be down again soon?'

'I don't know. You see, there is nothing for me to do. Olroyd is doing his best to unravel my uncle's affairs and find some clue to the mystery, and he seems to have got to the end of his resources pretty well. There is really nothing for me to do at the Gate House.'

'I shall miss you,' said Muriel.

'I have a little terrier at my rooms in town. He misses me, too,' laughed Cunningham.

'It is not very nice to compare me to your little terrier.'

'I did not mean to do that. I meant that it is not much consolation merely to be missed. I shall be perfectly miserable.'

'That will be foolish.'

'Do you never feel miserable?'

'Never. Why should I?'

'No, indeed, why should you? I suppose it is the fact of my never having had a sister that

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makes me appreciate having a companion like you.'

'And I never had a brother,' said Muriel.

'We must manage to have a good day to-morrow somehow,' said Ralph.

'I am going to Rayford,' said Muriel.

'For the whole day?' and Ralph's face fell.

'No. I am coming back early in the afternoon.'

'Then, I'll come over to Camptown to meet you, unless you would rather I did not.'

'I shall be glad,' she answered.

Then Mrs. Wingfield came in, and soon afterwards Cunningham left. He returned to the Gate House, and found Olroyd smoking in the study.

'Are you any further forward?'

'No. By the way, Cunningham, has your imagination ever suggested a place where your uncle might have hidden his will?'

'Never. Of course, in a house like this, there are a thousand and one possible hiding-places. Has it occurred to you that he might have slipped it between the leaves of a book?'

'It is possible,' said Olroyd, with a quick glance at him. 'What put the idea into your head?'

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'Your inability to find the will anywhere else.'

'I do not see his object in hiding it so securely.'

'It may have been done, and afterwards forgotten,' said Cunningham carelessly.

After dinner Olroyd returned to the study alone, Cunningham preferring to smoke in the morning-room. He closed the door and put a chair near it, so that he might have timely warning of anyone's coming. He did not like to lock it.

'Where to begin?' he said to himself, as he looked at the shelves round the room. 'He would probably do it in a hurry, fearful of being disturbed, and it would therefore be a book easily got at, not from the shelves near the ground, nor those high up. I will commence here.'

His conclusions were based on his suspicion of Cunningham, not on any ideas Mr. Quixley might have had.

Olroyd carefully took every book from its place and opened it, searching for the missing will. Shelf after shelf was gone through in vain, but he persisted in the work. Somehow he felt convinced that he would find it. Cunningham's suggestion had been so apparently careless that

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Olroyd could not help believing that the carelessness was studied.

Presently he came to a book which, as he took it from its place, fell open in his hands. There was the envelope containing the will, the seal unbroken. It was just the same as when he had seen it after Mr. Quixley had sealed it up in his office. He replaced the book, carried the envelope to the lamp standing on the table, and bent down to examine the seal more closely. If Cunningham had had this in his possession and replaced it, it had probably been tampered with. He felt the seal, searching for some roughness under the flap of the envelope, and was disappointed. There was nothing to show that it had been touched since it was first fastened.

'Skilfully done,' he muttered. He was inclined to be unbelieving. 'Very skilfully done indeed.'

He stood upright, and in doing so looked across the top of the lamp towards the unshuttered window.

It was pitch dark without, and in the window, as in a looking-glass, he saw the reflection of the lamp and of his own figure.

And he saw something else, not quite at first, but a moment afterwards.

The envelope slipped through his trembling

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fingers and fell upon the carpet. His lips moved, as if to utter a cry. But no cry came. Only a sighing gasp—a gasp of terror!

Pressed close against the glass at one of the bottom corners of the window was a face—a white face, very shadowy, very indistinct. Only the eyes were clear, and they were wide, staring eyes—eyes that looked steadily into his.

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AT ONE OF THE BOTTOM CORNERS OF THE WINDOW WAS A FACE.

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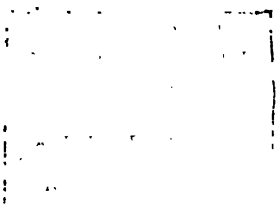

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CHAPTER VII

'LET IT BE A SECRET'

RALPH CUNNINGHAM lay back in an armchair, a cigar in his mouth, a local paper upon his knees. The paper did not interest him, and even the cigar was not as comforting to-night as usual. Time was in one of its slow moods, and Ralph was impatient for bedtime and the dawn of a new day. To-morrow he would see Muriel, and he had much to tell her.

'I think she likes me,' he said reflectively, studying the lighted end of the cigar. 'Of course, in a place like Dean, she cannot have seen many eligible fellows, which is all the better for me.'

'Cunningham!'

The door was thrown open suddenly, and Olroyd stood in the entrance. His voice was agitated and his face pale.

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'Good heavens, man! what's the matter?'

'I've had a fright—lost my nerve completely for a minute. Somebody looked in at me just now through the study window.'

'Who was it?' asked Cunningham, starting up.

'I don't know—an old face, I think.'

'Not—not Mr. Quixley?'

'No, no, I don't think so; I don't know. I suddenly looked up, and there were two eyes close against the glass watching me. I tried to call out, but couldn't.'

'We'll go and search.'

'May I help myself to a little brandy?'

'Yes, and stay here. I'll go and have a look round.' And Cunningham hurried out of the room.

Olroyd's hand trembled as he raised the tumbler to his lips. The brandy, which he drank almost neat, sent a warm glow through him, and seemed to relax chilly fingers from his heart. He sat down by the table; he could not return to the study alone.

Presently Cunningham came back.

'I can find nobody, and the gate is shut. Are you quite sure your imagination has not played you a trick?'

'Quite sure.'

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'Olroyd, are you certain it was not my uncle?'

'It couldn't have been. It couldn't——'

'It might,' said Cunningham. 'There may be places in this house which we do not know of. Let us go to the study.'

'It's awfully foolish of me, Cunningham. I do not remember making such an idiot of myself before, but those two eyes looking at me seemed to freeze me.'

He followed Cunningham to the study. Although the brandy had warmed him, he was quite willing that his companion should lead the way, and there was still fear in his face as he looked to make sure that the eyes were not there now.

Cunningham opened the window and put his head out.

'It is very strange. Were you sitting at the table?'

'No; I was standing just here. I had been searching in some of the books for the will. I looked up suddenly, and there were the eyes in the bottom left-hand corner.'

'Did they disappear directly?'

'No; they looked into mine steadily. I say, Cunningham, you haven't been playing me a trick, have you?'

'No. Why, man, you're still trembling!'

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'I see it was not you,' said Olroyd; 'the eyes were darker than yours.'

'Could you not see the face?'

'Only dimly. I didn't imagine it, Cunningham; someone was there. It might have been——'

'Well?'

'Perhaps the same eyes looked in upon Mr. Quixley that night?'

Cunningham shut the window and closed the shutters.

'I wish I had been in the room,' he said. 'You have very probably missed a clue to the mystery. You will not work any more to-night, I suppose?'

'No.'

'You did not find the will?'

'No,' Olroyd answered. 'One moment: I will just lock up these papers.'

He glanced furtively into Cunningham's face as he spoke. There was the ghost of a smile upon it, and Olroyd was troubled that he could not read its meaning.

'You have some contempt for my fear,' he said, locking the drawer.

'Oh no, not exactly that. I dare say I should have been startled, but I do not think I should have been actually terrified.'

'I am not quite myself.'

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Cunningham turned out the lamp, and they went to the morning-room.

'Wouldn't it be as well to ask Jervons if he has been out to-night?' said Olroyd.

Cunningham rang the bell, and the butler came in.

'Bring some more soda-water, and, by the way, Jervons, have you been out in the grounds to-night?'

'No, sir.'

'Because Mr. Olroyd thought he heard somebody outside the study window just now.'

'Cats, maybe,' Jervons suggested.

Cunningham smiled, but Olroyd looked at the old man's eyes. They were light and watery, not like the eyes which had stared into his.

'Has it ever occurred to you that Jervons knows more about Mr. Quixley than he pretends to?' Olroyd asked, when the butler had left the room.

'I am convinced he does not. Of course, the idea occurred to me, but his astonishment at finding the old man gone was too genuine to be assumed.'

Ralph Cunningham went to bed and forgot all about Olroyd and his fright. He had a pleasanter theme to lull him to sleep—the vision of a fair woman whom he fondly hoped was looking

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forward to to-morrow with even half the anticipation with which he was.

At least half an hour before the train from Rayford was due, Ralph Cunningham was at Camptown Station. He was full of fears. Someone might, by an unlucky chance, be with her—some acquaintance who lived at Dean, or possibly her mother. It was, therefore, with a sense of relief and a feeling of satisfaction that he saw her get out of the carriage alone.

She looked up and down the platform, and her smile when she saw him was a welcome.

'You have been waiting?' she asked.

'A little while. I walked rather fast. It is a good excuse for not walking so fast on the way back.'

'We are not so late as we were on the last occasion, are we?' and she pushed back a rebellious little curl as she spoke.

She was just a little nervous. It had hardly seemed strange that Mr. Cunningham should call frequently at the cottage, but that he should take the trouble to come all the way to Camptown for the sake of walking home with her was a different matter.

'It is very good of you to come to meet me,' she said.

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'It is good of you to let me do so. We seem fated to act on unconventional lines, Miss Wingfield.'

'Is this unconventional?' she asked with a smile.

'Some people might think so—not that I care a bit what people think. After all, it might almost appear a chance meeting, mightn't it? Besides, I have a thoroughly good excuse.'

'You make me think I am doing something rather wrong. Perhaps your good excuse will relieve my mind.'

'It is a double excuse. I wanted very much to see you, and I am obliged to go back to London to-morrow.'

'I am not sure the excuse helps me much.'

Muriel laughed and tackled another rebellious curl.

'The worst of it is that I do not know how long it will be before I can come here again,' said Cunningham. 'Even a man with considerable leisure has business to attend to sometimes; that is my case.'

'I thought you told me once you had no business?'

'In the ordinary sense, I have not. A kind fate, or otherwise, as you choose to look at it, has ordained that I am not obliged to work for a

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living, but at the same time I am by no means a free man. I am interested in one or two companies, and I do some honorary work in connection with two charitable institutions.'

'How good of you!'

'Oh, believe me, I didn't want you to look upon it in that light,' laughed Cunningham. 'My conscience pricks me sometimes when I think how much more I might do. I only wanted to prove that I was obliged to go.'

'You must have found Dean dull,' said Muriel. 'I am used to it and love it; that, of course, makes all the difference.'

'I have not found it dull,' he answered. 'You know I have not.'

She did not answer. There was another little curl to attend to.

'Don't you know that I have not, Muriel?'

It was the first time he had called her by her name, but she hardly noticed it.

'You must know it,' he went on quickly. 'I am a very ordinary sort of fellow—there are lots better about—but there has come to me an extraordinary love for just one woman in the world, Muriel, and I want that woman to be my wife. Will she?'

'Am I that woman?'

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'Yes, dearest. My happiness lies in your power. It is a terrible power to have, Muriel. Please do not use it to hurt me until you have carefully thought over what I ask.'

'Mr. Cunningham, I——'

'May I not be Ralph?'

'Ralph,' she said quietly—and the name had a new sweetness in it for him as she spoke it.—'Ralph, I do like you; you know that. I have never liked anyone so much.'

'Say loved instead of liked, dear, and I am content.'

'No, Ralph, you must listen to me. You know very little about me. We have somehow been thrown together, simply because you have had no other companion, and once away from Dean you may view things in a very different light. I do not want you to think you are in love with me, and find out your mistake presently.'

'What a dear, pretty, world-wise little woman it is, to be sure!' he said, putting his arm through hers.

She did not mind that, but she went on: 'I am not going to let you bind yourself to a girl you know next to nothing about. I care for you too much to do that.'

'Look at me, Muriel.'

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She looked up at him.

'Honestly now, is there anyone else?'

'No.'

'Then, I am bound, and you cannot prevent it. My dear little girl, I know all about you. Your eyes are an open book; I can read your history in them. Say yes, Muriel.'

She did not answer.

'I love you, dearest. I know I can make you happy. Trust me.'

'Ralph, if I——' She paused.

'Well, dearest?'

'I do love you, but I do not want you to make me say yes. I mean it—I really mean it.'

'Why not? Are you frightened of yourself?'

'No.'

'Of me, then?'

'No. I hardly know what it is I am afraid of, but there is something—something I cannot define. I must confess to make you understand. You have grown very dear to me, very quickly have you become so, almost as if I had been waiting through my whole life for that strange meeting of ours in the lane; but as quickly, and as surely, there has grown a shadow beside me, a something which seems destined to come between us.'

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'Give me the right to hold you close, Muriel; then shall no shadow come between us.'

'It is no fancy, it is very real, Ralph.'

'Not so real as my love,' he answered. 'Say yes, Muriel, and if shadow there is, it will have less power to harm us.'

Her arm tightened a little upon his.

'Say you will be my wife,' he whispered.

She stopped suddenly. There was nobody in the lane.

'I will, Ralph, on one condition.'

'A thousand conditions so that you say yes, dear.'

'Let it be a secret between us for the present.'

'From your mother?'

'From everyone.'

'I promise. No one shall know until you give me leave to speak.'

He put his arm round her and kissed her on the lips.

'Mine,' he said. 'Let me be quite happy soon, darling.'

She pushed back several rebellious curls.

'Now I want you to let me go on home alone. I shall not see you until you come to Dean again. When will you come?'

'It may be three weeks.'

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'Perhaps the shadow will have gone in three weeks,' she said.

'And then, Muriel?'

'Then you may ask me what you will.'

She held out her little gloved hand.

'Oh, Muriel,' he said, 'only your hand at parting for three long weeks!'

She held up her face to him.

Heavy wheels were grinding up the lane. There was only time for one short embrace. Then she hurried away towards Dean, and Ralph watched her go. She turned and looked back at the bend in the road, and waved her hand. Then she was gone.

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CHAPTER VIII

MRS. WINGFIELD'S BONFIRE

MARK OLROYD had not found the straight road to fortune so easy to traverse as he had expected, and he felt happier when Cunningham had gone back to town. He did not doubt for a moment that it was Cunningham who had placed the will where he had found it, and it was quite possible that the eyes which had looked in upon him, and had terrified him so, belonged to someone in Cunningham's confidence. To Cunningham he had denied that he had found the will; but, if necessary, he could defend the lie behind his professional capacity and his doubts of Cunningham's straightforwardness. Indeed, might not Cunningham know a great deal about Mr. Quixley's fate? At any rate, there was enough uncertainty to make his own actions appear simple and honest.

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Olroyd continued to come to the Gate House, and to sit looking through papers in the study, but not at night-time. Nothing would have induced him to stay there after dark. Really, there was nothing for him to do now. Still, he came to Dean, and it was natural he should stop and speak to Mrs. Wingfield when he saw her in the garden; natural, too, that she should ask him in, if it were afternoon and near tea-time. Mrs. Wingfield seemed to like him, and Olroyd was quick to take advantage of the fact.

'Have you thought anything more about leaving yet?' he asked.

They were sitting at the round table, only it was not drawn up close to the fire now, the weather being warmer, and Muriel seemed to have lost some of her spirits. To her, Olroyd was a poor substitute for Ralph Cunningham.

'Nothing is definitely settled,' Mrs. Wingfield answered.

'You will be glad to leave Dean, Miss Wingfield?'

'On the contrary, I should prefer to stay here.'

'Surely you must find it rather dull at times?'

'Isn't every place rather dull occasionally?'

'You are a philosopher,' laughed Olroyd.

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'She is rather perverse, Mr. Olroyd, to speak the exact truth,' said Mrs. Wingfield. 'Had I wanted to remain, she would probably have wanted to go.'

Mrs. Wingfield smiled as she spoke, but the smile was not a genuine one. It was a mask to hide annoyance. Matters were evidently not running quite smoothly between mother and daughter, and here again Olroyd found an opportunity.

He schemed to get Muriel alone one afternoon.

'Do you know, Miss Wingfield, you have my deep sympathy,' he said.

'Indeed. Why?'

'Because you are obliged to leave Dean when you would so much prefer staying here. I wonder why Mrs. Wingfield is so determined to go away. A mere whim, I suppose.'

'Mother is not given to whims,' Muriel answered. 'She has her reasons, which in their way are very good ones, only they do not happen to appeal to me.'

'I am sorry.'

'Your sympathy is entirely wasted, Mr. Olroyd. After all, the change will not affect me very much.'

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'It is for myself I am sorry,' said Olroyd. 'Pleasant companions are not so easily found, and it seems that I have found them only to lose them.'

'I am astonished to find you think us pleasant.'

'Oh, come, Miss Wingfield, I cannot think you put such a small value on yourself—or on your mother—as that. I had expected so much from my new friends.'

'You make friends very readily.'

'Not as a rule; but this is, I think, an exceptional case,' he answered. 'Perhaps I am meeting a trouble halfway. I may see a great deal more of you in the future.'

'It is not likely.'

'You cannot be going out of the world altogether, nor hardly to a more secluded spot than Dean. Where are you going?'

'You must ask my mother,' said Muriel. 'She is arranging everything, and I do not know what her ultimate plans are.'

Olroyd pulled his moustache. Muriel's manner was offhand. This sympathetic vein had no effect upon her.

'Mr. Cunningham will be surprised to find the cottage empty should your mother leave before he comes to Dean again.'

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He glanced at her as he spoke. If the colour in her face deepened a little, it was not enough to betray her.

'Do you think so?' she asked innocently.

'I do, and I think I could give a reason. I am not trying to pay a foolish, blundering compliment. I am very interested in Ralph Cunningham, and, to tell you the truth, he rather troubles me.'

'Why?'

'He has not been the same since his uncle's disappearance. I have been tempted to wonder sometimes whether he knows more than he admits.'

'What do you mean, Mr. Olroyd?'

'My meaning is somewhat difficult to express,' he said slowly. 'One or two things have happened which alone mean nothing, but taken together require some explanation.'

'Have you asked Mr. Cunningham to explain them?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I have been waiting for matters to explain themselves, and somehow they will not do so.'

'I thought you called yourself his friend?' said Muriel, with contempt in her voice.

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'I do, therefore I have been slow to let these ideas take hold of me. They were not my own, to begin with, but those of the police. I believe Cunningham is being watched in London.'

Muriel did not answer, nor did she show any sign of surprise.

'One thing seems certain,' Olroyd went on, 'Jervons up at the Gate House is not to be trusted. The circumstances are very peculiar, Miss Wingfield. Cunningham comes to Dean on the very day that Mr. Quixley disappears because Jervons sends for him—strange, seeing that he had only been to the Gate House once before in his life, and was not, on his own showing, a favourite of his uncle's. But there is a stranger thing. Mr. Quixley made a will some eighteen months ago, which will I saw; and although I do not remember to whom the bulk of the money was left, I know it was not to Ralph Cunningham. This will mysteriously disappears, and if it is not found Cunningham comes into the property. There is a good deal that wants explaining, Miss Wingfield.'

Muriel was silent for some moments, and then she looked steadily into his face.

'Of course you have a right to your opinions, Mr. Olroyd; but I think it would be more honest

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if you ceased to call yourself Mr. Cunningham's friend, don't you?'

Without waiting for an answer she turned and left him.

Olroyd did not feel the reproof as keenly as most men would have done. To begin with, he was not at all thin-skinned, and, besides, he honestly believed there was much Cunningham could explain if he would.

'When she comes to think over it, she will not be so satisfied of Cunningham's innocence,' he mused.

And herein Olroyd showed his want of knowledge concerning women—women who are loving, loyal, and true. It never occurred to Muriel to have the faintest suspicion of Ralph Cunningham, but she did conceive an immense contempt for Mark Olroyd. Had she known Ralph's address in town, she would have written to him; but she did not know it, and it would be of little use writing to the Gate House. Next time she met Jervons she would ask him, but she did not think it wise to go to the house on purpose. Olroyd was so constantly there, and it would be hateful that he should fancy for a moment that his cowardly insinuations had had any effect upon her. One good effect her contempt had; Olroyd

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ceased to come to the cottage. Mrs. Wingfield remarked it.

'I do not think Mr. Olroyd can have come to Dean this week. I have not seen him lately.'

'I suppose he has finished his work here,' Muriel answered.

'Well, we can leave the keys for him,' said Mrs. Wingfield.

'Then, we are going?'

'Yes, immediately. I have taken a house which, although not quite what I wanted, will do. I have already bought some furniture, and Tramp is taking some of our things from here to-day. Mary will go, too, and get everything ready for us.'

'One would think we had something to be ashamed of, we are doing things so secretly,' said Muriel.

'Don't be so foolish, child! You must pack up your boxes, and do not take any rubbish with you. We will have a bonfire, and burn all the rubbish before we go. Oh, I forgot to tell you: Mrs. Pollard wants you to go and have tea and supper with her to-morrow evening. I promised you should go.'

'Very well, mother.'

Perhaps Muriel took a lot of rubbish with her

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—her ideas and her mother's might differ; at any rate, she cast aside very little for Mrs. Wingfield's bonfire.

It was nine o'clock when Muriel returned from Mrs. Pollard's. There was no light in any of the front-windows of the cottage, but the red glow which came from the garden behind told her that her mother had not yet finished with her bonfire. She walked round the cottage, and saw her mother come from the shed with an armful of rubbish, which she threw on the blazing heap. The fire was deadened for a moment, but sprang into new and vigorous life as Mrs. Wingfield raked it together. It was apparently the last of the rubbish, for Mrs. Wingfield did not return to the shed. She was only careful that everything should be burnt. So intent was she upon her work that she did not hear her daughter's approach, and did not know she was there until, happening to look up from her raking for a moment, she saw her standing on the opposite side of the fire.

'Muriel!'

'What a lot of stuff you are burning!' she said. 'Where did it all come from?'

As she spoke she bent down and picked up some loose papers which had escaped the fire.

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She looked at them casually, and was about to throw them on the heap, when she paused.

'Why, mother dear, what is this?'

'Put it down.' The command was harsh and peremptory.

'But look! here is——'

'Throw them down, I say! Do you hear me?'

'But, mother——'

Regardless of her skirts and the flames, Mrs. Wingfield dashed across the burning heap, and, snatching the papers from Muriel's hands, flung them on to the fire and held them down with the rake until they were ashes.

'Mother!'

The girl's face, reddened in the blaze, had a look of terror in it. Her eyes, her parted lips, her whole attitude, were full of questioning.

'I am sorry if I hurt you, but you should do as you are told,' said Mrs. Wingfield, and she looked straight and steadily into her daughter's face.

'Mother! mother! What does it all mean?'

'Mean? Isn't that heap proof enough that I have been burning rubbish?'

The two still looked into each other's eyes. Muriel did not speak.

'Rubbish. Do you understand?'

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"THROW THEM DOWN, I SAY! DO YOU HEAR ME?"

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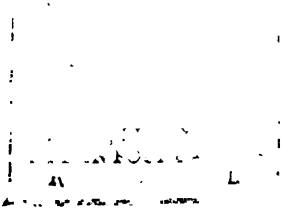

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'Yes, I understand. Only rubbish;' and Muriel turned and went slowly towards the cottage. Mrs. Wingfield turned again to the fire, raking it this way and that vigorously, so that none of the rubbish should escape, and the heap gradually died down to smouldering ashes. Then Mrs. Wingfield went towards the cottage almost as thoughtfully and slowly as Muriel had done.

The back-door closed with a bang, there was the sound of the sharp turning of the key and the grating of the bolts. A light shone in a window for a moment, then the blind was drawn down.

It was not until then that the crouching figure of a man straightened itself and shouldered its way through the hedge close by the shed.

'What was it that startled her so?' he muttered as he groped amongst the ashes. 'It was surely something very terrible which could bring such a look into her face, which could make her speak as she did.'

Nothing rewarded his labours. His hands grasped only ashes.

He went to the shed, which was open. There was nothing there but a broken market basket, a torn sack or two, and a few potatoes in a corner.

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'I wonder what it was.'

He stood for a moment looking towards the dark cottage, then quietly pushed his way back through the hedge again, and, like a shadow, was lost in the night.

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CHAPTER IX

MARK OLROYD'S CONCLUSION

If Olroyd entertained suspicions of Ralph Cunningham, there was one person, at least, who was quite as suspicious of the solicitor. When Mr. Biedermann heard that certain securities of Mr. Quixley's were missing, he immediately jumped to the conclusion that they were identical with those Olroyd had delivered to him, and was rather disappointed to find they were not. Although Mr. Biedermann had always kept well out of the reach of the law's clutches, he was not scrupulously honest, and it annoyed him to think that Mark Olroyd might be. He was, indeed, so anxious to prove—to his own satisfaction—that he was not, that he watched him carefully. There was little that Mr. Olroyd did which was not known to Mr. Biedermann.

The keys of the cottage had been left at the Gate House in Olroyd's absence, and now that the Wingfields had gone he gave up his constant

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visits to Dean. In spite of his care, Mrs. Wingfield had managed to slip away without his knowledge.

A few days later Biedermann came into the office.

'I hardly expected to find you, Olroyd,' he said. 'That Quixley affair has taken up a lot of your time. Any discovery?'

'No.'

'Of course you would not say yes if there had been.'

'Probably not,' was Olroyd's answer.

'I have called to see you once or twice.'

'For anything particular?'

'For advice. You know a Mrs. Wingfield over at Dean, don't you?'

'Slightly.'

'A respectable person, eh?' asked Biedermann.

'Certainly. Why do you ask?'

'She has taken that old house of mine in Silver Street for a short time, and paid a quarter's rent in lieu of references. The place is tumbling down from being empty so long, so I could not afford to be particular.'

'Some people have strange tastes,' said Olroyd, concealing the satisfaction this information gave him. 'You ought to have paid her for living in that house of yours.'

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'It suits me better as it is,' Biedermann answered. 'By the way, the daughter is rather good-looking.'

'Is she?'

'Come, Olroyd, you have not been over at Dean all this time without finding that out.'

'I had something else to do besides admiring pretty girls; and, to tell you the truth, I am rather busy to-day.'

'Olroyd sat down at his desk as he spoke and took up a pen.

'A gentle hint, eh?'

'Just the truth,' smiled Olroyd.

'I'm off. Still, it is not waste time to admire a pretty girl, and I shouldn't be much surprised if this Miss Wingfield has got something hanging to her, something one wouldn't mind getting, even with the obligation of taking her as a fixture along with it.'

'What do you mean?' said Olroyd, putting his pen down and leaning back in his chair.

'You are busy to-day. I'm off. Good-bye.'

It was pure fancy on Mr. Biedermann's part. He had no knowledge whatever of Mrs. Wingfield's circumstances, but he was aware that Olroyd had gone a good deal to her cottage, and he gave him credit for not troubling himself unless there

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was something to be gained by it. He believed in Olroyd's disinterested affection as little as he did in his honesty. He had merely drawn a bow at a venture, but the change it had produced in Olroyd showed him that his shaft had hit some mark.

It had indeed struck Olroyd unexpectedly. What did Biedermann know? Could he in any way have an idea of the terms of Mr. Quixley's will? It was impossible, but, at any rate, it was no time to be idle. The sooner he took the opportunity of meeting Mrs. Wingfield by accident, the better. In the hope of doing so, he found time to be constantly in the neighbourhood of Silver Street, but he did not see either Mrs. Wingfield or Muriel. Each day he made up his mind to call on the morrow, rehearsing excuses which would sound plausible for doing so; but on the morrow he always deferred his visit to the next day. He could not quite forget how Muriel had treated him on the last occasion on which he had spoken to her.

It was not surprising that he did not meet Mrs. Wingfield, for she seldom left the house, and, although she urged Muriel to go out, her daughter hardly ever went. Muriel had appropriated a room at the top of the house, from the window of which there was a glimpse of the sea,

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and, except for meals, she lived in this room almost entirely. Hour after hour she sat there, trying to work sometimes, trying to read sometimes, but really succeeded only in thinking. And they were horrible thoughts, which led her to an end upon which she dared not dwell. Life for her had changed completely. That last walk with Ralph Cunningham seemed a great way back in the past now, and all the bright hopes which had blossomed suddenly had faded and fallen. Why had she accepted that love so fearfully? Why had she pledged her lover to secrecy? Many times since then she had accused herself of caprice, but now she knew that, almost unconsciously, some shadow of evil must have been hanging over her even while her lover's kiss was upon her cheek. And the evil had surely come.

Even now she scarcely knew what it was, but it was always there, shutting out the sunlight of life with its outspread, impenetrable wings. In her own room it seemed to throw a shadow over the glimpse of the sparkling sea, and when at meals with her mother it stood between them, throwing a shadow over them both.

Sometimes they spoke small commonplaces—a question and an answer. Sometimes their eyes met, looking steadily into each other's for a space,

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as they had looked that night beside the bonfire. Muriel had said she understood then. Did she understand either then or now?

To ordinary persons it would undoubtedly have been a depressing household, and certainly the house was dismal. Mr. Biedermann had hardly exaggerated when he said it was tumbling down. The rooms seemed to have dwindled and shrunk with age; the walls were bent and bowed with the weight of years upon them; the floors, too solid to give way, had grown aslant, most of the furniture requiring a wedge under it on one side or the other to keep it straight and perpendicular; and there was not a door in the house which shut tightly. Mrs. Wingfield and Muriel were too much engaged, each with her own thoughts, to think of or to notice these drawbacks. Tramp had had so many vicissitudes in life that the fact of having a roof over him at all had not yet got out of the state of being a surprise; and Mary, while noticing everything, rejoiced that she was so important a character in a real romance. She climbed the slanting, creaking stairs to bed every night, trembling and afraid, yet she was glad to be in the haunted house, for haunted it certainly must be. How could such a place be otherwise?

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During the day Tramp helped Mrs. Chenneby at the greengrocer's shop just round the corner of Silver Street—she had bought most of Mrs. Wingfield's garden produce until now—but he lived in the house, and in the evening sat in the kitchen with Mary. Almost every evening the little servant, sinking her voice to a whisper, would ask him the same question, 'Have you discovered anything yet, Mr. Tramp?' She had not forgotten that there was a secret understanding between them, nor had Tramp. He invariably shook his head solemnly in a manner which suggested that the secret was of great importance to him, and that he was not quite certain of the wisdom of trusting Mary fully. One evening she asked him the question as usual, and Tramp did not shake his head.

'There's more than one thing to find out, missy—there's lots on 'em.'

'Hush, Mr. Tramp! Walls has ears.'

She struck an attitude and looked round the dimly-lighted kitchen. Tramp nodded.

'Walls has ears,' she repeated, her finger on her lips.

'I ain't a-goin' to tell 'em nothing, not me.'

'Whisper it to me, Mr. Tramp.'

'There was a young fellow as used to come to the cottage,' he said after a pause.

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'There was.'

'What might his name be?'

'It might be anything, but he calls himself Mr. Cunningham.'

'Not him. I means the other one.'

'Mr. Olroyd?'

'Ah! Now, what's he got to do with the mystery, eh?'

'Nothing that I knows on.'

'He's in it,' said Tramp with conviction. 'Shouldn't be very much surprised if he was very much in it.'

'Why?'

'He's hangin' about this 'ere street; I've seen him. You knows the shop at the corner, Mr. Tuke's? Well, he makes believe to be lookin' at the books, but he's watching for someone—that's what he's doin' of.'

'Perhaps he's a hero, after all?' speculated Mary.

'A what?'

'A hero. You ain't been very well edicated, have you, Mr. Tramp?'

'Maybe he is, maybe he ain't,' was the answer, 'but he ain't all right. Tell you what, missy: I wouldn't 'a' lent him my donkey, when I had one, no not if he'd left his own mother in pawn agin' her.'

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This was a long communication for Tramp to make, and impressed Mary accordingly.

'We shall find it all out, you and me,' she said, and Tramp nodded in affirmation.

Mark Olroyd little knew how closely he was being watched. He had noticed the man in Mrs. Chenneby's shop casually, but he did not connect him with Dean or the Wingfields. He had never seen him there.

'I shall call to-morrow and chance my welcome,' he said, as he went back to the office. 'People will begin to notice that I hang about the street. And it is for love! I set before myself another goal—money. But it is love now—love and nothing else.'

He experienced a certain satisfaction in finding this out about himself. There is a germ of good in all of us, buried very deeply sometimes, alas! and perhaps the sordidness of his motives disgusted Olroyd as the charm of Muriel's personality grew upon him. She was always in his thoughts, and he idealized her.

'Mr. Cunningham is in your room, sir,' said a clerk as he entered the office.

Olroyd paused a moment before opening the door of his private room. A week ago, even yesterday, perhaps, he would not have required a

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moment for consideration, but love had given him the semblance of a conscience.

'I hope I have not kept you long,' he said, advancing towards his visitor with a frank smile.

'No. I have been to the Gate House and found you had not been there for some days. Olroyd, what has become of the Wingfields?'

Cunningham did not attempt to ask the question carelessly. He was too much in earnest, too troubled about Muriel, to do so.

'My dear fellow, I can only tell you that the keys were left for me at the Gate House, and that I found the cottage empty. However, it does not matter; Mrs. Wingfield had paid her rent to quarter-day.'

'Hang the rent! I want to know where they have gone.'

Olroyd shrugged his shoulders.

'I did not know you were so hard hit as that.'

'Well, you know it now.' And then Cunningham went on: 'Forgive me, Olroyd; I did not mean to be unpleasant, but I want to find them.'

Olroyd was compassionate.

'I understand; but may it not be for the best as it is? A woman who goes off in this—this clandestine manner, has probably some reason for doing so, and her daughter——'

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'What of her daughter?' asked Cunningham.

'You know best, of course,' said Olroyd blandly; 'but if there was any sort of understanding between you, she could have let you know where she was to be found. The conclusion seems obvious.'

'What conclusion?'

'I am only practical, and am not looking at the circumstances in a romantic light,' Olroyd went on; 'but it seems to me that, as she did not tell you where she was going, she evidently did not want you to know.'

'Supposing she did not know herself?'

Olroyd smiled and shrugged his shoulders again. He had no answer to such a question.

Cunningham rose.

'I shall probably be at the Gate House for some days. If you hear anything of them, please let me know. I mean to find her.'

Olroyd's conscience was a little troubled. He had told no actual lie, which pleased him, but at the same time he had not spoken the truth.

'He loves her,' he said to himself; 'so do I. All is fair in love and war.'

But conscience, even such a poor one as Olroyd's, was not to be silenced by a fallacious proverb. The pity of it was that Olroyd refused to listen to its promptings.

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CHAPTER X

MR. TUKE, BOOKSELLER

Possibly, at some time in the past, Silver Street had been a pleasant one to live in; it was anything but cheerful now. It was a short street, and on one side was mostly blank wall, the back of a brewery; on the other side were half a dozen houses, looking all the more desolate because of the signs they still bore of having once been of importance. Only one house separated Mrs. Wingfield's from Mr. Tuke's bookshop at the corner, and this house and Mr. Tuke's and Mrs. Chenneby's were all Mr. Quixley's property.

Mark Olroyd knew this, and the fact that Mrs. Wingfield had come to live in Silver Street astonished him. There was always a motive in all he himself did, a careful thought for future consequences, and he found it difficult to believe that other people were not guided in the same

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way. Under the circumstances, therefore, it was only natural that he should set himself the task of finding out why she had come to this particular neighbourhood. Mr. Tuke was not left out of his calculations. Tramp had told Mary that Olroyd only pretended to be looking at the books while he watched, but this was only partly true. He had taken the trouble to establish a friendly intercourse with Mr. Tuke, and gave him to understand that he was immensely interested in old books. Whether Mr. Tuke believed him was quite another matter. Gossip had it that the bookseller was not to be judged by appearances; that his simple smile had a great deal of keen perception behind it; and that nobody in Docksmouth had ever yet been known to boast of having got the better of him. Mr. Tuke was always ready to sell you bargains, it was said; but the best of the bargains always remained with Mr. Tuke. Gossip, however, should never be taken as a warranty of character, and certainly no one could possibly look more guileless than the bookseller did as he stood at the door of his shop, his spectacles pushed up on to his forehead, his hands clasped behind him underneath his coat-tails.

'It will rain before morning, Mrs. Chenneby,' he said, as that lady appeared at her door.

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'If you say so, Mr. Tuke, I make no doubt it will.'

It was evening, and there were rolling banks of black clouds seawards.

'Nothing further been heard of Mr. Quixley, I suppose?' said Mrs. Chenneby.

'Nothing, marm.'

'We shall not get off paying our rents, at any rate,' she went on. 'Business is not what it was in Docksmouth, but I don't hear of any of the rents coming down. I've been seriously thinking of moving out westwards. Plenty of business there during the season, with all the holiday folk.'

'I've almost forgotten what business is like, Mrs. Chenneby. It's thirty-five years come Michaelmas since I came here, and I don't take shillings now where I used to take pounds.'

'You may have made your fortune, Mr. Tuke.'

'It might possibly not rain to-night,' was the answer, and, as a few heavy drops began at that moment to splash upon the pavement, Mr. Tuke no doubt meant to convey to his neighbour that he had not done so.

The sudden and heavy shower served as an excuse to Mark Olroyd. He was passing Mr. Tuke's shop at the time, and went in for shelter.

'Likely to be a nasty night, Mr. Tuke,' he

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said. 'You will not mind if I wait until the shower is over?'

'Pleased, Mr. Olroyd.'

Olroyd took two or three books in turn from the shelves, and examined them carefully. He was anxious to impress the bookseller.

'Did you ever see Mr. Quixley's books?' he asked presently. 'There is a wonderful collection at the Gate House, though nothing of much value, I fancy.'

'I have heard of his collection,' Mr. Tuke answered. 'Indeed, I have sold him some at intervals.'

'You knew him pretty well, then?'

'Oh yes, I knew him.'

'When did you last see him?'

Mr. Tuke looked up into a corner of the shop, as though his knowledge were all stored there for use when wanted, and only required a look to bring it into his head.

'He came into my shop one morning about a month before his disappearance,' he said slowly. 'Before that I hadn't seen him for months. I think the former occasion was on the very day he called upon you. I distinctly remember his saying that he had been doing his duty and signing his will.'

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Mr. Tuke's knowledge was rather disconcerting. It was strange that he should know anything about Mr. Quixley's private affairs.

'That was eighteen months ago, at least,' said Olroyd.

'Yes, it would be about that.'

'You seem to have been in Mr. Quixley's confidence, Mr. Tuke,' Olroyd said slowly, examining another book.

'I can hardly say that, Mr. Olroyd. I am an old tenant of his, and have, in fact, collected his Docksmouth rents for him for some years: not a arduous job—Mrs. Chenneby's next door, and two houses in the High Street. His house round in Silver Street has been empty for a long time.'

'So I have seen, and the one next to it until recently. Do you know anything about the people who have come to live there?'

'Wingfield is the name, and I know there is a pretty daughter.'

Mr. Tuke chuckled over his knowledge exceedingly.

'Still an eye for a pretty face, eh?'

'There are not many masculine eyes get too old for that,' laughed Mr. Tuke, and then he went on, after a pause, 'I'm rather sorry for them —for the Wingfields, I mean.'

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'Why?'

'Well, it's a tumble-down old house they've got, to begin with, and they are likely to get disturbed there, to go on with.'

'How?' asked Olroyd, immensely interested.

The bookseller seated himself on the corner of the little counter.

'There's a reason for Mr. Quixley's house remaining empty which I dare say you have heard of. It's a good house, and not in bad repair; but it is haunted, and I am afraid the ghosts are likely to disturb the Wingfields.'

'Ghosts!' laughed Olroyd.

'I know people laugh at them,' said Mr. Tuke, 'but when it comes to the point they have always taken another house. The fact is, you cannot help feeling the peculiar influence of the place directly you enter it.'

'Have you the keys?'

'Yes.'

'I should like to go over it some day.'

'At any time you like.'

'What is the particular story attaching to the place?' asked Olroyd after a pause, during which Mr. Tuke had continued to smile blandly at him.

'I never heard any particular story,' was the answer, 'but I fully believe in the ghosts.'

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Olroyd looked at him. Somehow, he was not the kind of person one would expect to admit such a thing. He looked uncompromisingly matter-of-fact, without a particle of romance or poetry in his composition.

'Yes, I believe in them, and if you inquire you will find that there are not many people who care about Silver Street. There are not many who turn round the corner of my shop after dark, I can assure you.'

'You interest me, Mr. Tuke. I must certainly see the house. I am not a believer in ghosts myself. At least——'

He remembered the face at the window at the Gate House, and paused.

'Ah, you do not like to commit yourself,' said the bookseller, with a smile.

'Strange things happen sometimes,' Olroyd answered. 'But there is generally a very simple explanation.'

The rain had ceased, and Olroyd left the shop. He walked towards the High Street to give Mr. Tuke the impression that he was going home, but having gone a little distance, he crossed the road and made his way back to Silver Street.

He had started out that evening with the intention of walking up the street in the hope of

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meeting either Mrs. Wingfield or her daughter, and, although he had no hope of doing so now, he wanted to look at the house. His conversation with the bookseller had made him more determined than ever to find out why Mrs. Wingfield had gone to live there. There must be some reason.

It was quite dark now, and Olroyd walked along by the brewery wall, stepping quietly. The street was certainly very silent—not the sound of a footfall upon the pavement besides his own. Mr. Quixley's house was dark, and there was only one light in Mrs. Wingfield's, at one of the top windows. The blind was drawn up, and there was a shadow on the ceiling.

'Probably the servant's room,' Olroyd thought.

Some feeling of sentiment would doubtless have taken hold of him had he known that it was Muriel's room, and that she was sitting there thinking at that moment. The book she had been trying to read had slipped from her hands, and lay upon the rug at her feet. She was not asleep, but she sat perfectly still, her eyes fixed on vacancy. Once, a little while ago, half an hour, perhaps, a noise had disturbed her—a sound as if someone were moving in the next room to hers, the corresponding room in the neighbouring

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house. But, of course, it was her fancy. The next house was empty.

Although Olroyd experienced no sentimental feeling, being ignorant of Muriel's near presence, he nevertheless continued to look at the lighted window, simply because it was the only light visible in the two houses.

He had turned to retrace his steps, when he stopped suddenly. Someone had turned into the street, and was coming towards him with quick steps. He stood back against the wall in the shadow. He did not want to be seen. It was a woman approaching, and just before reaching him she crossed the road. As she did so, she looked up at the lighted window, and suddenly stood still.

A half-smothered cry came from her lips, and she started back as though someone had struck her. Olroyd watched her, but did not move.

Why should she be so startled at that light in an upper window?

Olroyd looked up at it again, and had considerable difficulty in restraining himself from uttering a cry of astonishment, too.

It was not the light there that had startled the woman, but the windows of the corresponding room in the next house. There was a light there,

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too, a faint light it seemed, yet it was strong enough to cast a distorted shadow on the ceiling, a shadow which moved slowly first across one window, then across the other.

'The ghost!' said Olroyd underneath his breath.

Certainly it was astonishing, seeing that, as far as anyone knew, the house was empty. What did the woman standing in the middle of the road know or fear? It was quite evident to Olroyd that she experienced something more than astonishment. For a full minute she stood swaying to and fro as though she were going to fall, and then, with another little cry, almost of pain, she rushed across the street.

Then, for the first time, Olroyd recognised her.

It was Mrs. Wingfield!

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CHAPTER XI

MARK OLROYD REQUESTS AN ANSWER

MR. TUKE was standing at the door of his shop next morning watching Tramp put vegetables into one of Mrs. Chenneby's carts, when Olroyd joined him.

'Good-morning. Can I go over the house in Silver Street now?'

'Certainly. It is a most convenient time, for I have nothing to do.'

Mr. Tuke got his hat and the keys.

'I am sorry to give you so much trouble,' said Olroyd as they walked up the street; 'but, thinking over the matter last night, I came to the conclusion that I ought to go over the place. Mr. Cunningham, Mr. Quixley's nephew, has placed his uncle's affairs in my hands, and it is just possible that the house may contain some clue.'

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Mr. Tuke first nodded his head, and then shook it gravely.

'You don't think so?' said Olroyd.

'No.'

'The ghosts may have some knowledge of Mr. Quixley.'

'They were in residence long before his disappearance. What sort of a man is this Mr. Cunningham?'

'Oh, a nice fellow; but, to be quite honest, I do not altogether understand his behaviour since his uncle's death.'

'In what way do you mean?'

'I cannot help thinking that he knows more about Mr. Quixley than he admits. Of course, this is quite between ourselves.'

'Quite, Mr. Olroyd,' said Mr. Tuke as he fitted the key into the door. 'I wouldn't mention it for the world. I am an excellent hand at keeping a secret.'

Our impressions of persons or of places are drawn, not so much from the places or persons themselves, as from the circumstances under which we see them, and it was hardly strange, therefore, that Olroyd should experience a certain uncanny feeling as he entered the house. His main object in coming was to find some explanation for what

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had occurred last night. He followed Mr. Tuke from room to room, noticing how they were placed in relation to one another, and paid little attention to the bookseller's remarks concerning the beauties of the house and the good repair it was in.

'Grinling Gibbons!' said Mr. Tuke, tapping a carved mantelpiece, 'and that's a very fine ceiling, Mr. Olroyd. I don't know whether you are interested in such things?'

'Not much. There seems to be a good deal of rubbish about the place.'

In many of the rooms there were pieces of old and long-disused furniture—a broken table here, an easy-chair with the leather torn there. There were several packing-cases of different sizes, some open and empty, some nailed down and apparently full; and in more than one corner was a heap of dusty and torn books.

'Yes, there's a good bit of rubbish,' Mr. Tuke admitted.

'It belongs to Mr. Quixley, I suppose?'

'Yes. He's sent it over from time to time—stuff that was no use to him, and for which he had no room at the Gate House.'

'I wondered where he had put all his books,' said Olroyd; 'I couldn't account for them. This

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explains it. I think I ought to go through these cases at some time, Mr. Tuke; there may be something of value in them.'

'You can look through them when you like, only you will allow me to be present at the time. You see, I am responsible to Mr. Quixley for what is in this house, and there is no absolute certainty yet that he is dead.'

'Of course, Mr. Tuke.'

'I don't think you will find much to increase the amount of the probate duty,' Mr. Tuke went on. 'When Mr. Quixley had anything of value which he did not want, he had a habit of turning it into current coin of the realm. He was no fool, Mr. Olroyd, and when he bought rubbish he generally managed to have a bargain mixed up in it somehow.'

'Then he really dealt in curios and books?'

'To some extent. I dare say he was a little mad, but there was method in his madness.'

Olroyd was particularly interested in the room in which he had seen the light last night. It was quite empty, and looked as innocent as a room well could. It was dusty and dirty, and was not in such good repair as the rest of the house. The paper had peeled from the walls, and a large piece of the ceiling had fallen.

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'And where do the ghosts usually walk, Mr. Tuke?' he asked carelessly.

'All about.'

'Oh, not in any particular room?'

'No.'

'Was this house and the next ever one, do you think?'

'Never. I believe this house and mine were once part of the same.'

They descended to the cellars, spacious underground vaults in which there was more rubbish and a few packing-cases.

'I do not believe in your ghosts, Mr. Tuke,' Olroyd said as they left the house; 'but at the same time I hardly wonder that nobody wants to live in the place. There is an uncanny sensation about it, and looking out on a blank wall is not cheerful.'

'Most people have something else to do besides looking out of the window all day. Then, you will come and look through the rubbish some day. Any time will suit me;' and Mr. Tuke went into his shop.

That afternoon Olroyd called upon Mrs. Wingfield.

The little maid-servant opened the door, and in answer to Olroyd's question would not commit

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herself to say whether her mistress was in or out, but she would go and see, and would the gentleman follow her?

Olroyd was left alone for some time. The room was not well furnished; there was an unmistakable second-hand appearance about the things in it, and there was not sufficient furniture for the size of the apartment. Indeed, there was altogether a hollow sound in the house, as though it were half empty. He had noticed it the moment the front-door was opened.

As Mrs. Wingfield approached the door of the room, her face underwent a gradual change—a process of straightening out, as it were, a metamorphosis from frowning anger to smiling welcome. Mrs. Wingfield was capable of a very pleasant smile when she chose, and she wore this smile as she entered the room. Olroyd rose to meet her.

'It is the same Mrs. Wingfield!' he exclaimed. 'I was doubtful whether it could be.'

'Indeed!'

'Mr. Biedermann is a client of mine, and in the course of conversation he mentioned your name as his new tenant. By his description I thought it must be you, but I could not be certain. I am delighted to find it is. I trust you are well?'

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'Yes, thank you.'

'And your daughter?'

'Oh yes. It is very good of you to call; but, as you have doubtless discovered by the appearance of this room, we are only birds of passage.'

'You are not remaining here?'

'Oh dear no.'

'You find the house dull?'

'Well, before Mr. Biedermann tries to let it again, I should advise that something were done to it; but that is not the reason I am leaving. I always intended my stay in Docksmouth to be a short one, and the fact prohibits me from making any new friends, Mr. Olroyd.'

'But surely that does not apply to me?'

'I am afraid it must,' Mrs. Wingfield replied, with a smile.

'That is too bad. I have been looking upon you as quite old friends. I think I told your daughter once that I had hardly any friends in Docksmouth.'

'You must not think me rude, Mr. Olroyd, when I say that I do not wish to make any new friends, and that I have never looked upon you as an old one. Our positions in life are very different, and our ways must of necessity lie very

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far apart. I am sure you will not misunderstand my meaning.'

'You give me little opportunity of misunderstanding, Mrs. Wingfield, you are so very emphatic; but is it not just possible that you may be mistaken with regard to the divergency of our lives?'

'I think not.'

Olroyd stroked his hair contemplatively for a moment.

'My call, Mrs. Wingfield, was not altogether a courtesy one. I had a definite object in coming, although I probably should not have mentioned it on the occasion of my first visit, were it not for your intimation that you wish it to be my last.'

'And what was the definite object, Mr. Olroyd?'

'Your daughter.'

For a moment Mrs. Wingfield's face had assumed an expression that had anxiety in it, but as Olroyd answered it relaxed into a smile again.

'I do not quite understand,' she said.

'Your daughter, Mrs. Wingfield, although I have known her so short a time, has attracted me more than I care to admit even to myself. I have passed that time of life when a man is supposed not to know his own mind, so I need not enter

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into that side of the question. All I ask is that I may have the opportunity of seeing more of your daughter, and that you will help me to win her.'

'You have not spoken to Muriel?'

'No.'

'I think it will be useless to do so, Mr. Olroyd.'

'But with your support, Mrs. Wingfield?'

'I should not attempt to influence my daughter's choice.'

'Under no circumstances, Mrs. Wingfield?'

'I know of none.'

'Our lives do not lie so far apart as you imagine,' said Olroyd. 'Indeed, they happen to touch rather closely. I love your daughter, and because I fancy she has been tempted to give her affections elsewhere, I cannot afford to lose any point which may be in my favour.'

'Muriel in love?' exclaimed Mrs. Wingfield.

'Hardly that, I hope, but—shall we say?—interested in Mr. Ralph Cunningham.'

'Impossible!'

'They saw a great deal of each other at Dean. Perhaps you are not aware how often they met.'

Mrs. Wingfield remained thoughtful for a few moments. There was a menace in Olroyd's

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manner, and it was necessary to see to the bottom of his scheme.

'And you want me to use my influence with Muriel in your favour against Mr. Cunningham?'

'That is my meaning precisely.'

'My influence would not count even were I disposed to use it.'

'I think it would.'

'You evidently do not know much of Muriel,' said Mrs. Wingfield with a smile.

'I think your help would be very valuable, Mrs. Wingfield.'

'But I shall not use it,' she answered rather angrily.

'Pardon the contradiction,' Olroyd said suavely, 'but I think you will.'

'We need say no more,' said Mrs. Wingfield, rising. 'You have my answer.'

'But you have not heard why I think you will try to influence your daughter,' said Olroyd, rising too.

'Nothing will make me.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing whatever.'

'Would it be well—for you, I mean, Mrs. Wingfield—if I told Mr. Cunningham of the scene which occurred between you and your

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daughter on the night you burnt your rubbish in the garden at Dean?'

He watched her very keenly as he spoke, but if she started at all, she was herself again in a moment.

'You may mention it if you like,' she said. 'The scene, as you are pleased to call it, was of no importance to anyone. Are you attempting to levy blackmail, Mr. Olroyd?'

'My dear Mrs. Wingfield, you overstate the case. I have some slight knowledge of the cause of that little episode, and I use it for my own ends. They are not despicable ends, remember. I simply want you to help me find favour with your daughter, with whom I am in love. We can assist each other, that is all.'

'In love?' exclaimed Mrs. Wingfield.

'Desperately in love, Mrs. Wingfield.'

'And in want of money?' she asked.

For a moment Olroyd paused. He found the question difficult to answer. He remembered the eyes at the window, and he looked into Mrs. Wingfield's. No, hers were not the eyes that had frightened him.

'Money!' he said. 'I was not aware your daughter had any. You must think over my proposal, Mrs. Wingfield. I will call again in a

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week for my answer. Do not make an enemy of me.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'No, advising merely. Believe me, we have both something to gain by helping each other. Is it a compact between us?'

'You shall have my answer in a week if I am still in Docksmouth.'

'If you are not, I shall tell my story.'

'I very much doubt if you have one to tell, but between this and then I shall find out. I may also succeed in discovering why you have so suddenly fallen in love with Muriel.'

'The reason for love is hard to find, Mrs. Wingfield,' he answered. 'Poets and philosophers tell us so. On consideration, I am sure you will see that a compact is to our mutual advantage. This day week, then.'

The little maid-servant was in the hall, and opened the door for him. Olroyd took no notice of her at all. It might have astonished him had he heard her remark as she closed the door behind him.

'I wonder if he's a villain, as Mr. Tramp says,' she murmured. 'He's quite good-looking enough.'

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CHAPTER XII

MURIEL'S DISCOVERY

THAT Muriel lived chiefly in her room at the top of the house was not displeasing to Mrs. Wingfield. She, too, felt the shadow of evil standing between them whenever they were together, but, unlike her daughter, she could define its shape and understand its meaning. Perhaps it was for this reason that she did not fear it so much. Some day it would vanish, and here, in Docksmouth, she could work towards that end, steadily, quietly, and alone. To have her daughter's eyes constantly upon her, questioning her every action as they had questioned that night beside the bonfire, would be inconvenient.

Mrs. Wingfield was a strong woman, had all her life deliberately planned her actions, and, her mind once made up, had acted without asking advice of anyone. She could look back and

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know that she had made few mistakes; yet, after her interview with Olroyd, she wondered whether she had done right this time, and questioned her wisdom in coming to Docksmouth.

'I might have gone away altogether; perhaps it would have been best,' she said to herself. There was some regret in the thought, and a momentary giving way in her attitude, but she was herself again almost directly, full of determination and energy. 'It is nonsense to say so. A few more days—yes, within the week I shall be able to answer Mr. Olroyd. I must, I will. After that I may ask him a few questions, too.'

She laughed, a little hysterically, and went about her work.

The plans she had long ago formulated, and which were now incidentally to result in Olroyd's discomfiture, progressed favourably, it would seem, and Muriel was tempted to wonder if there was any shadow of evil, after all.

It was chiefly to give her mother an opportunity of taking her into her confidence that she did not rise to go directly dinner was finished one day.

'Mother.'

'Well, dear?'

'I want to speak to you, to make a proposal

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which I have been thinking very gravely over for some time.

'I am willing to consent to anything that will be for your good,' Mrs. Wingfield answered.

'It will be for my good, believe me, it will, and I dare say it would only be for a short time.'

'You have told me nothing yet, Muriel.'

'I want to go away for a time, mother. I think I could get a situation as a governess without much difficulty.'

'Nonsense, Muriel; it is not to be thought of!' and Mrs. Wingfield rose to put an end to the conversation.'

Muriel rose, too.

'Mother, it must be thought of.'

She spoke very quietly but very firmly. She had never before spoken to her mother in such a tone, and Mrs. Wingfield was quick to understand that in this matter her daughter was as determined as she was herself. It was not a pleasant discovery to make just now, and it irritated her. She had too much to do, too much to think about, to be worried by any side-issue of this kind.

'Tell me, what makes you so anxious to go?' she said after a pause.

'Is that necessary, mother?'

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'Perhaps not. I think I can guess the reason. You did not want to leave Dean; now you want to get away from here. I suppose Mr. Ralph Cunningham is at the bottom of your restlessness.'

Muriel looked at her mother quickly, but betrayed no astonishment.

'Ralph Cunningham may possibly have had something to do with my wishing to stay at Dean; he has nothing to do with my anxiety to leave Docksmouth.'

'I have nothing to say against him, Muriel; be open with me.'

'Confidence for confidence, mother — how gladly will I give it! Tell me the history of the bonfire that night, and I will tell you of Ralph.'

'Ralph!' The fact that her daughter spoke of him as Ralph did not just then interest her so much, but the exclamation gave her a moment for consideration.

'Are we to confide in each other?' said the girl coaxingly. 'Surely you know I shall sympathize, shall be ready to help, whatever the difficulty is.'

'Your foolish fancies, Muriel, are distressing, and not a little embarrassing,' said Mrs. Wingfield. 'I have nothing to explain, for the simple reason that there is nothing to tell. I had a bonfire as the easiest means of getting rid of rubbish.'

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'Then, mother, you must consider my proposal. I am determined to get a situation—absolutely determined. If there is to be no confidence between us, it is far better that we should be away from each other for a time. Life as it is is a misery ;' and Muriel turned and left the room.

Mrs. Wingfield almost commanded her to return. For a moment she was angry, furiously angry, that her daughter should thwart her, and there was a look in her eyes which can seldom come, surely, into the eyes of a mother. But in a moment it was gone, and she did not call her back. She remembered that Muriel had spoken of Mr. Cunningham as Ralph, naturally and unhesitatingly, and she remembered Mark Olroyd. The week he had given her in which to answer him was fast slipping away. Every minute was of value. Would Muriel consent to have anything to do with such a man as Mark Olroyd on any consideration?

'He must receive his answer another way,' she said, clenching her fists tightly—'another way.'

Muriel mounted to her retreat with an aching heart. The afternoon sun turned the glimpse of the sea to red gold, and a small white sail upon it going seawards seemed the embodiment of happiness flying freely on outspread wings. To her

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soul came that longing which has come to so many of us—oh, to forget, to flee away, to rest! Long she stood at the open window, conscious of the passing time only by the deepening colour on that strip of ocean yonder.

'I must go,' she murmured. 'I cannot stay here. What is the secret? Who can she be shielding? If she would only let me help her! Anything rather than this silence, this terrible fear of the unknown.'

A knock at the door disturbed her. Was it her mother come at last to tell her?

'Come in!'

Mary entered with a cup of tea and a plate of thin bread-and-butter.

'Mistress said you might like to have it brought up to you.'

'Thank you, Mary,' said Muriel, turning again to the window.

'Is that sufficient bread-and-butter, miss?'

'Oh yes, quite.'

'Why, you haven't looked, miss.'

Muriel turned round.

'Quite, thank you.'

'You must get lonesome sitting up here as you do,' said the little servant.

'It is not so dark as your kitchen, Mary.'

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'That's true, miss; but, then, I like it. I'm fond of mystery.'

'Please don't talk nonsense, Mary.'

'Wouldn't for the world, miss. Did you know that Mr. Olroyd called the other day?'

'Called here?'

Mary nodded. She saw that her young mistress was surprised, and attitudinised accordingly.

'Did my mother see him?' asked Muriel.

'Yes, miss, and with pleasure, I think. And that's not all: he's been hanging about in Silver Street for a long time. That's rather mysterious, ain't it?'

'It is no concern of mine,' said Muriel.

'I thought it might be,' answered Mary. 'One never knows what these kind of things mean, and I thought you'd like to know all about it.'

The tea was cold when Muriel turned to drink it. She had watched that strip of ocean until the gathering night had hidden it, thinking of her mother, of Mark Olroyd's visit which her mother had not mentioned, of Ralph Cunningham, who seemed to be far away, beyond her reach altogether. The horizon of her life was growing darker even as the night was. With a sigh she closed the window and lit the lamp. With a sigh she took

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up a book and lay back in her chair. Her eyes were heavy, for she had slept little for some nights past. The printed page soon became blurred and indistinct, and presently the book slipped from her fingers. Kind Nature asserted herself, and Muriel fell into a deep sleep.

When she awoke it took her some few minutes to recollect where she was. She had been dreaming pleasantly.

'It must be nearly supper-time. I don't want any, but I had better go down.' She looked at her watch. 'Two o'clock!'

It must have stopped during the day. She held it to her ear. It was ticking quietly as usual. She could not believe that she had slept so long. She opened her door gently and listened. The house was perfectly silent, save that a board creaked as she leant forward to look down the stairs. There was no light in the hall, not a sound in the house.

'I will get into bed,' she said; but she paused as she was closing the door. 'I suppose there is nothing the matter. I will just go down and see that mother is in her room.'

Quietly, on tiptoe, she went down the stairs and knocked gently at her mother's door. There was no answer. She opened it and went in.

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'Mother,' she whispered.

Still there was no answer, and, going to the bed, she found it empty. What had happened?

With a beating heart, and seriously alarmed, Muriel descended to the hall. There was no light in any of the rooms. There was not a sound in the house. She wished she had brought a candle; but there would certainly be some matches on the dining-room mantelpiece.

She was on the threshold of the room, when she stopped and listened. There was a sound—under her feet, surely—a knocking! No, it was fancy. Yes, there it was again—a knocking, stealthy, but persistent.

'Mother! mother! where are you?' cried the terrified girl.

Tramp and the little servant were heavy sleepers, or they must have heard her. Terrified as she was, she did not cry out again. It would never do to wake Tramp or Mary. With a great effort she steadied herself and forced herself to silence.

From the hall a few steps led down to a long passage, which went to the kitchen, and out of this passage was another and shorter one leading to the door at the head of the cellar steps. The knocking could be nowhere but in the cellar.

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THE LIGHT THREW A SHADOW ON TO AN OPPOSITE WALL—A WOMAN'S SHADOW.

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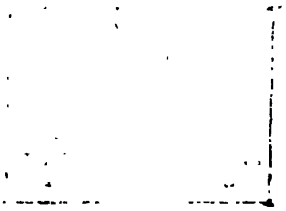

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To this door Muriel went and listened, her ear to the panel. Without doubt the knocking was in the cellar. She could not feel the key, and expected to find the door fastened, but it was not. The door was unlocked, although the key was in the lock on the inside.

The knocking was louder now, but the steps descended into darkness. Yet somebody must be there, her mother or someone else. She must find out.

Silently she descended step by step. The cellarage was large, broken up by jutting walls convenient for partitioning off one part from another. As Muriel reached the bottom step she saw a dim light in a far corner, evidently the light of a candle. A jutting wall hid it, but the light threw a shadow on to an opposite wall—a woman's shadow.

'Mother!'

In an instant the light was extinguished, there was the clatter of a metal candlestick upon the stone floor, and the sound of quick feet coming towards her. Muriel tried to cry out, but only a sigh escaped from her lips, and she sank fainting upon the steps.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE APPOINTMENT MADE

It was easy for Ralph Cunningham to say that he intended to find Muriel Wingfield, but it was quite another matter to know how to set about the task. When carefully considered, none of his plans seemed practical. The Wingfields had departed without leaving a trace behind them, and no one in Dean seemed to care.

At a loss what to do, he took Jervons into his confidence.

'I am very anxious to find them,' he said. 'I dare say you can guess why.'

'That ain't difficult, Mr. Cunningham.'

'Can you suggest anything?'

'You say Mr. Olroyd doesn't know where they are?'

'He says so.'

Jervons shook his head.

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'To my way of thinking, that's no proof he doesn't. He's been over here a good bit since you've been away, Mr. Cunningham.'

'He had a lot of work to do.'

'He did most of it over at Mrs. Wingfield's cottage, then,' said Jervons. 'He was there most days.'

'Was he?'

'Yes, and he's hardly been here at all since the Wingfields left. When I gave him the keys, I could see he was put out about their going; and if he doesn't know where they are, it strikes me he's as anxious to find them as you are, and maybe for the same reason.'

This was an entirely new idea to Cunningham. It had occurred to him that Olroyd was not quite open with him, but he had not supposed that he had deceived him concerning Muriel.

'Maybe the Wingfields are in Docksmouth,' Jervons went on; 'and if they are, I know a party there who might be useful to you. He knew something of the master, and he's one of those who know a good deal about most people.'

'Who is that?'

'Mr. Tuke, the bookseller at the corner of Silver Street. It might be well worth your while to look in upon him.'

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Had anything else suggested itself, Ralph Cunningham would probably not have troubled Mr. Tuke, but, as it was, he went to call upon him on the following morning.

Mr. Tuke was, as usual, standing at his shop door, his spectacles pushed up on to his forehead, his hands clasped behind him under his coat-tails. He noticed that it was a stranger approaching, but had no idea who he was. Cunningham made no pretence of being interested in old books. He walked straight up to the bookseller.

'Good-morning. Are you Mr. Tuke?'

'I am.'

'My name is Cunningham. I believe you knew something of Mr. Quixley of Dean? I am his nephew.'

'I have heard of you, and am very pleased to make your acquaintance. Is there anything I can do for you?'

'It hardly seems likely,' said Cunningham, with some hesitation; 'I have not come to ask you questions about Mr. Quixley. I am very anxious to find someone I am interested in, and it was suggested to me that you might possibly be able to help me.'

'Come into the shop, Mr. Cunningham.

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There's a chair. Sit down. Who was it suggested that I might help you?'

'Jervons, my uncle's butler.'

'And who is it you want to find?'

'A Mrs. Wingfield and her daughter.'

The bookseller looked up into the corner of the shop which seemed to be his depository of knowledge.

'Mrs. Wingfield and her daughter,' he repeated. 'Have they got anything to do with Mr. Quixley?'

'Nothing whatever. I want to find them because——'

'Because of the daughter,' said Mr. Tuke, and he chuckled at his own intelligence.

'Exactly,' said Cunningham. 'And I think I may say the interest is not all on my side.'

'Then, why has she run away without letting you know where she has gone to?'

'I cannot tell you. I do not know.'

'It looks as if she didn't want you to know, doesn't it?'

'It does, I admit; but at the same time I do not think that is the explanation. I have every reason for thinking otherwise. Jervons gave me to understand that you knew most people in Docksmouth, and I shall be grateful if you can help me.'

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'So you have taken Jervons into your confidence?'

'Not altogether; but the fact is, I am too much in earnest to mind what people think, or what my questions may suggest to them.'

'I like you for that,' said Mr. Tuke.

'And can you help me?'

'It is early to say yes or no, but at least I'll try. I'll make a few inquiries, and if they are in Docksmouth I dare say I shall find out.'

'That is very kind of you.'

'Not at all. I was young myself once, and although I never got as far as being married, I've been in love scores of times.'

'Perhaps it is not yet too late, Mr. Tuke.'

'Not for me, but it is for the girls. You see, I am getting old, and, as I should want a young wife, I am likely to remain as I am. Did I hear that you were Mr. Quixley's only relation?'

'I believe I am.'

'And there was no will, was there?'

'There was, but it cannot be found.'

'Indeed! And if it is not found you——'

'Exactly, I am the heir; but I hope the will may be found. I have every reason to believe that my name was not mentioned in it, and I have no wish to be the innocent cause of upsetting my

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uncle's intentions. I knew very little of my uncle, and, to tell you the truth, was not a great favourite of his.'

'I am surprised at that,' said Mr. Tuke.

'He was eccentric, you know; perhaps that was the reason he didn't like me,' laughed Cunningham. 'Then, you will try and help me? Shall I call to-morrow? Is that too soon?'

'I might know to-morrow.'

'Then I will come, and thank you very much.'

Mr. Tuke resumed his place at his shop door when his visitor had gone. His face was wrinkled with smiles, as though the conversation had greatly amused him.

'So there are two of them,' he chuckled. 'If I were the girl, I know which would win; but, then, what man has ever fathomed the depth of a woman's folly—or her wisdom, for that matter? I wonder what answer I shall give to-morrow.'

The uncertainty seemed to give him infinite satisfaction, for he laughed softly to himself all the rest of the morning.

Thinking of to-morrow, and hoping for the best, Cunningham turned into the High Street, and in doing so ran into a diminutive person with a very large basket on her arm, who was hurrying in the opposite direction.

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'I beg your pardon.'

'Lor!' was the answer. 'Bless me if it ain't you!'

Mary spread out her arms in astonishment. Here was the opening of another chapter in the romance.

Cunningham did not recognise her. He had not noticed her much when calling at the cottage, and he had never seen her without her cap and apron. The bonnet she was wearing, and which had evidently been made for a much more stately person, was an effectual disguise.

'You don't remember me?' she said.

'No.'

'Not at Dean?'

'Why, of course, yes. You were with Mrs. Wingfield.'

'Were and am,' was the answer.

'Is Mrs. Wingfield in Docksmouth?'

Mary looked round to see that no one was within earshot.

'She is.'

'And Miss Wingfield?'

Mary nodded.

'Where are they?' asked Cunningham.

'In Silver Street; but you mustn't come there.'

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'Why not? I used to come to the cottage at Dean.'

'Everything's changed,' said Mary, as emphatically as though the whole world had altered its shape and form. 'We're more mysterious than we was then. We've got a haunted house, and we're all feeling the effects.'

'I do not understand.'

'That's not wonderful, no more don't none of us; but we've all got our suspicions. The missus, she's got hers; Miss Muriel has hers; Tramp, he's got some; and so have I.'

Considerable stress was laid on the last statement, as being the most important of all.

'And what's strangest,' she continued, 'we none of us knows what the others think. I can tell you, we are mysterious.'

Cunningham was not aware of Mary's romantic tendencies, so was at a considerable loss to know what she was talking about.

'I want to see Miss Wingfield,' he said.

'That might be managed; but does she want to see you?'

'I hope so. Have you any reason to suppose she does not?'

'I'm in the dark; but you're the beginning of another chapter, that's certain.'

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'The beginning of what?'

'Another chapter. You're a bit of a romance, although you don't know it. Here, just write on a piece of paper, "Meet me to-night by the wicket-gate." That's the proper place to meet; but if you don't know of no wicket-gate, name some other handy spot, and Miss—Muriel—shall —have—it.'

Mary gave this promise tragically, as though she had desperately made up her mind to go through fire and water to its achievement.

Cunningham was doubtful whether the little servant was quite sane; but there could be no harm in making an appointment and entrusting her with the message. He tore a leaf from his pocket-book, and wrote:

'DEAREST MURIEL,

'Meet me to-night at eight by the third breakwater towards West Docksmouth. I shall wait until you come.

'RALPH.'

'I'll do my part,' said Mary, taking the folded paper; 'but, of course, I can't promise that she will come. You ain't the only one now, you know.'

'Who else is there?'

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'Mr. Olroyd.'

'Then, he lied to me.'

It was a thought put into words. He did not mean Mary to hear.

'I can well believe it,' she said. 'I marked him as the villain from the first.'

'Has he been there much?'

'No; but he's been hangin' about, and that's worse.'

'You will be sure to give Miss Wingfield that note?'

'Consider it done; you've got my word.' And the little servant hurried away.

Cunningham's first impulse was to go and have it out with Olroyd at once. He had deliberately deceived him. Why? Was he in love with Muriel, too? He might be. It was not likely that he was the only man to recognise her beauty and her charm. If Olroyd was ignorant of what had passed between Muriel and himself during that last walk they had had together, there was no reason why he should not try and win her if he could. Yet how could he be ignorant? One word of love, and surely Muriel would have stopped him. Cunningham could not understand it at all; but he decided not to see Olroyd until after his interview with Muriel.

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It was hard work killing time until eight o'clock, so hard, indeed, that soon after seven he was at the trysting-place waiting and watching for her coming.

Would she come? Had everything changed, as Mary said?

Now hope rose high; now fear depressed him.

And so he waited.

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CHAPTER XIV

MARK OLROYD'S TRIUMPH

WHEN Muriel came to herself after her fainting-fit, she was lying on the sofa in the dining-room, and her mother was bending over her, a glass of brandy in her hand.

'Mother, what were you doing?' was her first question.

'Nothing,' answered Mrs. Wingfield shortly, placing the glass upon the table.

'I must know, mother. Why will you not trust me?'

'I decline to be accountable for my actions to you, Muriel. You forget yourself.'

Mrs. Wingfield spoke with determination, but her daughter was as determined as she was.

'There must be confidence between us, mother, or I must go. This life is killing me.'

Mrs. Wingfield argued and persuaded, was

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angry and gentle by turns, but to no purpose. Muriel was determined to go, and this her mother dared not let her do. She was not ready to bid defiance to Mark Olroyd yet.

'If you would help me, Muriel,' she said at last, 'you must stay.'

'Why, mother?'

'There was a witness to our little scene beside the bonfire that night. Do you understand? How much or how little he knows I cannot tell; but for the present he must be kept silent.'

'What is the secret, mother? Who is it you are shielding?'

Mrs. Wingfield looked at her daughter quickly before answering.

'I have a secret, Muriel, but I cannot tell you now. Ask me no questions. In good time you shall know all; only stay with me now and help me.'

There was a piteous tone about Mrs. Wingfield's pleading. The woman was not so strong and self-reliant as usual. There was a wildness in her gestures which frightened Muriel.

'Who was the witness?'

'Mark Olroyd.'

'Has he threatened you?'

'Yes.'

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'And the price of his silence?'

'The opportunity to become better acquainted with you, Muriel.'

Mrs. Wingfield did not seem able to look at her daughter as she spoke.

'It need only be for a time,' she said after a long pause, during which Muriel had remained silent. 'You can pretend to care for him, and presently——'

'I hate him too much to pretend that,' Muriel said.

'You will not leave me?' Mrs. Wingfield exclaimed.

Certainly she was not herself to-night. She was afraid, and Muriel knew it.

'No, I will stay,' she answered.

Did she guess her mother's secret as their eyes met? She thought so, and her face was as pale as death as she wearily climbed the stairs to her own room.

The week was over, and Mark Olroyd walked slowly up Silver Street. A man who plays with edged tools knows well what a small thing may mar his success, and, though the goal be in sight, is ever conscious that he may fail at the last moment to reach it. How different from honest endeavour, which, though it may seem to fail,

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is nevertheless crowned with success, somewhen, somewhere.

Olroyd rang the bell and waited, quite prepared to be told that Mrs. Wingfield was not at home, and knowing well that he was practically powerless to harm her if she did defy him.

The door was opened by Mrs. Wingfield herself.

'May I come in?' he asked, pausing for permission to enter.

'If you will go into the dining-room I will send Muriel to you.'

There was a cold deliberation in her manner which was not reassuring.

'You have spoken to her?'

'She demands to answer all your questions herself. I will tell her you are here.'

Olroyd was left alone, feeling more like the vanquished than the victor. He did not trust Mrs. Wingfield. Had she laid a trap for him?

Muriel did not keep him waiting long. She knew the ordeal which was before her, had decided upon her course of action, and the sooner it was over, the better.

She entered the room and closed the door gently behind her. She was very pale, but she was resolute. Olroyd rose, but she motioned him to a seat, and sat down opposite to him.

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'There is little need for ceremony between us, Mr. Olroyd,' she said in a hard, dry voice that he would scarcely have recognised as hers. 'My mother has told me of your interview with her.'

'May I not plead my own cause,—not now, but when I know you better?'

'Delay is useless, since you know what my answer must be. There need be no pretence.'

'I am afraid your mother, perhaps unwittingly, has presented me in an unfavourable light, Miss Wingfield. I used the knowledge I happen to possess to impress your mother; it was not intended to come to your ears. I hoped to use another persuasion to you.'

'It cannot matter to you, since the result must be the same.'

'Indeed it does. I have faults, but there is much which might be said in my favour, and I want to change your opinion of me. Will you give me the opportunity?'

'You have the opportunity now.'

He rose and stood before her.

'You have only to command,' he said.

'Tell me what you know, and then leave me, with an oath never to repeat it to a living soul.'

'And my reward?'

'My good opinion, which you seem to value so

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highly—more, my real esteem. I shall know you for a real, true friend.'

She spoke in a level tone, without emotion. She would not allow herself to plead to him.

Olroyd did not answer.

'You hesitate,' she said, after a pause.

'I value your esteem, Miss Wingfield, but I long for more than that.'

'You refuse the opportunity offered,' Muriel said calmly. 'I am not disappointed. I expected you would.'

'I want your love, Muriel,' he said passionately. 'I am hungry for it. To gain it I would give up everything. Won't you let me try and win it?'

'Is there not to be a bargain between us, Mr. Olroyd? I understood my mother so.'

'Bargain! I hate the word. You are very cruel to me.'

'Why, then, ask me to give that which you must know I cannot give?

'Not now, but some day.'

'We had better keep to the terms of the bargain,' she said. 'As I understand it, it is this: you wish to marry me, and if I consent to be your wife you undertake to forget all you know against my mother. Am I right?'

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'Have you no heart, Muriel?'

'To esteem you, yes, but you refuse that; to love you, no, but I consent to the bargain. I will pay the price of your silence. I will be your wife.'

'You will love presently,' he said earnestly. 'When you understand the depth and truth of my love, you shall give me yours in return. What you have against me you will forget. The means I have used to win you, you will forgive. Now by your word you are mine, Muriel; soon you shall be mine by the bond of love alone.'

He took her hands in his, but his passionate words did not move her at all.

'I will not be a burden to you, Muriel. You shall order my coming and my going now and always.'

'You may come to see me when you like, you may tell whom you will that we are engaged, and you may depend upon me to keep my part of the bargain.'

'I love you, Muriel—I love you.'

He looked at the hands he held in an undecided way for a moment; then he bent down and kissed her.

'For me happiness begins from this hour,' he whispered.

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'I should like to be alone now, if I may,' she said.

'May I come to-morrow?'

'Yes.'

'Good-bye.'

And once more he kissed her, and was gone.

For a few moments she stood motionless where he had left her. So far the ordeal was over. To help her mother she had consented to marry a man she hated and despised. Of the future she could not think.

She did not go to her mother—time enough to tell her; she went straight to her own room. She might have thrown herself upon the bed and sobbed had she been able to, but she was past tears. She leant at the open window looking towards that strip of ocean. There was no white sail upon it to-day going seawards. Like hope, it had gone.

Presently there was a gentle tap at the door, and, without waiting for an answer, Mary entered. She closed the door mysteriously, and then, crossing the room on tiptoe, handed Muriel a folded piece of paper.

'For you, miss—of great importance.'

The little servant watched her young mistress as she opened it, looking to see delight and surprise in her eyes.

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'There is no answer, Mary.'

'He ain't waiting for none—leastways, not here. He give me that note when I met him, all of a sudden, in the High Street. I told him I couldn't promise that you'd go.'

'You know what is in this note, then?'

'Why, of course. Didn't I suggest it?'

'Perhaps I will go, Mary. I will think about it.'

'I'd go, miss, if I was you. He'll be coming here if you don't. That's the way with these men when they falls in love with us. There's no pacifying of 'em.'

'You can go, Mary.'

As an ambassador, Mary had expected a better reception; but she went, glad to know that she had an important piece of information to impart to Mr. Tramp.

Mark Olroyd went back to the office with a light step. Love would come. He had enough faith in himself not to doubt that. Muriel was to be his wife. That was the goal he had set out to attain, and he had attained it.

He entered the office with a smile upon his face, and one of the clerks, who wanted a day off, thought it an excellent moment to make the request—made it, and got what he wanted.

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'Never knew the governor in such a lovely frame of mind,' he remarked to a fellow-clerk. 'I believe he'd have given me a rise in screw if I'd asked him.'

Possibly Olroyd would have done so. He was pleased with himself and all the world as he sat down at his table and began opening the letters which had come while he had been out. He read them all carefully, making notes on one or two of them for his clerks' guidance.

'Muriel—dearest Muriel!' he murmured, as he opened the last letter.

The first words of it fixed his attention, and he glanced rapidly through it to the end. The smile died out of his face, even as life dies out of the face of a dying man, leaving him pale—deathly pale, as a corpse. His hands trembled, his whole frame twitched with emotion. He poured a little water into a tumbler which stood on the mantelpiece and drank it greedily.

'I cannot have read it aright,' he said.

Then he read the letter again carefully:

'DEAR SIR,

'By his letter dated January 14 of this year, Mr. Stephen Quixley, of the Gate House, Dean, gave us instructions to apply to you at this

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present date for five thousand pounds Chinese Gold Bonds left by him with you for safe custody. We inclose Mr. Quixley's order for their delivery to us, and shall be glad to have the securities forwarded in registered cover by return of post.

'Yours faithfully,

'WARD AND WARD.'

Olroyd knew the name of the firm well.

'Solicitors of Chancery Lane,' he muttered, white fear in his face. 'What does it mean? January 14!'

Well might he wonder. It was on January 14 that Mr. Quixley had disappeared.

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CHAPTER XV

THE APPOINTMENT KEPT

RALPH CUNNINGHAM waited by the third breakwater. Would Muriel come? He had gone to the trysting-place feeling certain that she would, but as the time crept slowly on his fears that she would not gradually increased. He consulted his watch at least every five minutes. Ten minutes to eight; five minutes to ; eight o'clock! The slow strokes of the hour came booming towards him from Docksmouth old church, and still no Muriel. One thing, at least, seemed certain: she was in no hurry to meet him. Would she come at all? In his despair he had visions of her tearing his note up and casting it aside carelessly, unworthy a second thought.

The number of people on the parade perceptibly diminished. There was a chilly wind blowing from the sea which drove them in earlier than

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HE DID NOT TURN UNTIL A HAND WAS LAID UPON HIS SHOULDER.

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usual. It was growing dark, too. Muriel would hardly come now. It must be half-past eight. No, only a quarter past. Cunningham leant against the rail of the steps which led down to the beach. He had said he would wait until she came. Perhaps at that very moment she was laughing at him, thinking what a long wait his would be if he kept his promise.

He had given up watching the passers now, for he had abandoned all hope of her coming. He had turned to look seawards, finding sympathy in the gray night gathering over the ocean. He did not distinguish the hurried footsteps that came along the parade towards him. He did not turn until a hand was laid upon his shoulder.

'Muriel!'

Was it fancy, or did she shrink back from him a little? Perhaps it was only the action of drawing her cloak closer round her.

'I thought you were not coming,' Cunningham said.

'I debated whether I should,' she answered, and he was startled at the sound of her voice. Like Olroyd that afternoon, he would hardly have recognised it as hers.

'Why, dearest?'

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He tried to put his arm round her. Had she not promised to be his?

'Don't, Ralph, please.'

She drew back from him. It was no fancy this time.

'Muriel! What is it? What has happened?'

She did not answer at once.

'I came to tell you,' she said after a pause, 'you must forget me, Ralph.'

'Muriel!'

It was all he could say. His whole questioning was in the tone of his voice.

'You must think what you will of me,' she went on hurriedly. This ordeal must also be gone through, and the sooner it was over, the better. 'You must not question me. I cannot answer; I cannot explain. There can never be anything between us. Only believe that, and let me go.'

She made a step forward as if to go at once, but he put out his hand and stopped her.

'You shall not go like that, Muriel. You must explain. I have a right to know why you have changed.'

'For pity's sake, Ralph, let me go.'

'I will not. Muriel, tell me the truth. Surely you can trust me.'

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'I would not have come had I known where to write to you. I tell you again, you must forget me. We can be nothing to each other.'

'Tell me why,' he said.

'Think what you will. Think that I have changed my mind, that I am unworthy, anything—only let me go.'

'I will not. Muriel, for Heaven's sake tell me the truth. Is it the shadow of evil you spoke about?'

'No, no. It is only that I have changed. We were hasty that day; we—— Please let me go.'

'You are hiding something from me, Muriel, and I will know it. There is nothing in the wide world shall come between us. Whatever it is, tell me. My love is strong enough to bear anything. You have not changed; it is not true. My darling, tell me everything. You must. You shall.'

He caught her in his arms, and, before she could prevent him, had kissed her passionately two or three times. Almost she kissed him in return, but would not, could not.

'Tell me, Muriel.'

'There is nothing to tell, only that I have changed,' she said desperately. 'Don't you understand?'

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'Do you mean—— No, you cannot mean that.'

'I have changed,' she repeated. 'I am young, vain, capricious—everything that is hateful; and I have changed, that is all.'

'You do not love me?'

'No, no, no! Now will you let me go?'

She spoke quickly and defiantly. Under her cloak her hands were so tightly clenched that the nails bit into the flesh. The pain seemed to give her strength to speak so.

'You shall not go until you have told me everything,' Ralph said. 'It is not true that you do not love me. I do not believe it.'

'Let me go. You have no right to keep me.'

'I have the right. You yourself gave it me when you promised to be my wife.'

'You have not that promise now.'

'Then, I demand to know why,' he said calmly. 'It is not just that a woman should pay no penalty for her cruelty.'

For a few moments there was silence. Only the voices and footsteps of the few passers on the parade echoed down to them, and the waves rolled towards them with a dull swish as the tide rose, and the shingle rattled under her feet as she changed her position. She had expected

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anger from the man before her. She had expected him to cast her aside almost at her first words. She had not reckoned upon his calm determination to know the truth. The real truth she dare not tell. She had commenced the sacrifice of herself that afternoon when she had allowed Mark Olroyd to kiss her; this was only the completion of the sacrifice, and it must be finished.

'I am engaged to—to another man,' she said.

Again the shifting of the shingle, but at his feet this time.

'To Mark Olroyd?' he asked.

She started at the question. She had not expected him to know.

'Yes, to Mark Olroyd,' she answered.

'What power has he got to make you his?' Cunningham burst out furiously. 'He is a liar and a perjured thief.'

'You forget he is to be my husband.'

'Do you love him?'

She did not answer.

'Tell me that you love him, and silence me now and for ever.'

'I am going to marry him,' she answered.

'What am I to think of you, Muriel? Is this a sacrifice for some good that can only exist in your own overwrought brain—a promise which

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this man has frightened you into? Or are you what you would have me believe—fickle, heartless, worthless? For Heaven's sake answer me truly. If you are driven to this by the threatenings of a coward, take my hand and tell me so. My strength shall be yours to lean upon. Together we can defy any tissue of lies. If of your own free will, because you love this man, you have promised to marry him, still tell me. I will think of you as gently as I can, though my heart breaks.'

'You must think of me as you will. I have nothing more to say.'

'Is it nothing to you that you wreck a man's life?' he asked.

He paused, but she did not answer. What answer could she give?

'I understand—it is not. I was pleasant to pass a few idle hours with, I suppose; afterwards, what could it matter to you? I have been a fool, and you have taught me a lesson. I had thought that fortune had smiled upon me and given me a true woman; and I find that fortune has only been laughing at me all the time. Were I wise, I should doubtless laugh too, show you that I did not care, that what to you was a mere idle flirtation was even less to me. Unfortunately, I have given too much to even attempt to laugh at my failure.

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You have beggared me too completely ; I cannot hide the truth from you. You have the satisfaction of knowing that you have succeeded in winning and spurning the best I had to give. It is colder, I think. I will not keep you, Miss Wingfield. Good-night.'

He stepped back to let her pass. For a few moments she did not move. What could she say? What could she do? The temptation to tell him everything was strong upon her, but she could not speak. It was better to go at once, and in silence, lest she should betray herself.

She moved slowly towards the pier. The night seemed to have grown very dark. Everything about her was blurred and indistinct, and the shifting shingle seemed to slip away from under her feet. She stumbled, and only the railing of the steps prevented her from falling. Cunningham was at her side in a moment, his arm out to support her.

'You must let me see you home.'

'No,' she answered.

He bowed his head and drew back.

With her foot on the first step, she turned round suddenly.

'Won't you say good-bye?' And her little hand shot out from under her cloak towards him.

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'Good-bye,' he said, without raising his head.

'Good-bye,' she answered, and the word was half choked in a sob. She turned to go, but he caught her arm.

'Muriel, tell me everything, darling!'

'Good-bye,' she said, but the sob was still in her voice.

'There is some mystery in all this. Won't you tell me what it is?'

'There is nothing to tell. Go away and forget me. You will live to be thankful that I am nothing to you.'

'Never! I will unravel the mystery without you.'

'You must not. For pity's sake go away and forget me.'

'You are afraid. I knew there was a mystery.'

'No, no, there is nothing. Of my own free will I am going to marry Mark Olroyd. Good-bye.'

She slipped from his grasp, and was on the parade in a moment. She turned to look down on him for an instant, and then hurried away.

Cunningham did not attempt to follow her. There was a secret, some reason why she was compelled to marry Olroyd. It was for him to find out the reason.

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He turned and walked thoughtfully down to the water's edge. Was Muriel false to him, or was she a brave woman sacrificing herself?

'She must be true, she is true,' he said gently. 'What is it that Mark Olroyd knows? By heavens! I'll have the truth from him!'

It was the time to act, and he hurried on to the parade. Under the first lamp he stopped to look at his watch.

'I'll have it to-night,' he said through his closed teeth—'to-night.'

And with quick steps he went towards the town.

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CHAPTER XVI

ANOTHER CHECK TO MR. OLROYD

In the dining-room of his chambers above the office, Mark Olroyd walked restlessly up and down, glancing every few minutes at the clock on the mantelpiece, and finding time as leaden-footed as Ralph Cunningham had done that evening. The dinner had been cleared away, had, indeed, been sent down almost untouched; but a spirit decanter was upon the table, and a tray with glasses and a soda siphon. It was evident that a visitor was expected, and just as evident that the host was anxious for his coming.

'He surely will not play me false,' said Olroyd, pausing to look at himself in the glass and to pull his moustache nervously. 'Good heavens! I'm as white as if death had suddenly caught hold of me. That infernal letter has turned my nerves to the consistency of jelly.'

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He turned to the table and mixed himself a whisky-and-soda, which he drank at a draught, then replenished the glass and again emptied it. It was unlike him to drink so greedily, and was proof enough that he was thoroughly unnerved and agitated.

He resumed his restless pacing up and down, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his brow knit as though in deep thought. He tried hard to concentrate his thoughts, but could not. In the hands of his expected visitor lay the only hope of his being able to extricate himself from his difficult position, and he was not sanguine as to what action his visitor would take in the matter.

'I think I had better tell him the truth,' he reflected. 'He is sharp enough to know that I am in difficulties, and may take it into his head to put obstacles in my way. I have treated him in an offhand way lately. Confound my bad luck! I thought I was quite safe—absolutely secure. Thank Heaven, at last!'

There was a loud knock at the front-door, and in a few moments footsteps were ascending the stairs. The housekeeper opened the room door.

'A gentleman to see you, sir.'

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'I thought you were never coming, Biedermann. I——'

Olroyd paused and drew back. It was not Mr. Biedermann who entered, but Ralph Cunningham.

'Unexpected, but none the less welcome,' said Olroyd. 'Why didn't you send me word and come to dinner?'

'I dined at the Blue Lion. I am staying there to-night.'

'That was unfriendly, Cunningham. You know I can always give you a bed.'

'Under the circumstances I should hardly be likely to trouble you,' was the answer.

His manner and the tone of his voice put Olroyd upon his guard. This was no friendly visit.

'Sit down,' he said carelessly. 'Can I give you some whisky? Have a cigar?'

'No, thanks,' said Cunningham, and he did not sit down. 'Olroyd, I've come for an explanation.'

'Of what?'

'You told me you did not know where the Wingfields were.'

'Well?'

'You told me a lie!'

'Excuse me, Cunningham——'

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'It is no good trying to conceal one lie with another. I know it was a lie.'

'Very well. What next?'

'I want an explanation,' said Cunningham.

'If I chose to give one, it might not be pleasant to you.'

'Possibly not; still, I mean to have it.'

Olroyd lit a fresh cigar before answering.

'Your manner is offensive and altogether uncalled for. I would remind you that these are my rooms, and that you are an uninvited guest.'

'If you prefer to give the explanation at the Blue Lion, you can come round there with me,' said Cunningham coolly. 'The explanation I mean to have.'

'If I give it, it will be freely, not because you threaten me. Make no mistake about that. I am too used to that kind of thing to be frightened by it.'

Olroyd mixed himself some more whisky-and-soda.

'As it happens I do know where the Wingfields are. I did not at first, but I do now. I had more than one reason for keeping that knowledge to myself.

He paused, but Cunningham made no comment.

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'The unravelling of the mystery of Mr. Quixley was one. Do you understand?'

Again he paused. He was anxious to know what Cunningham knew, and how much he knew; but Cunningham made no answer.

'Another, and a reason you will doubtless not be pleased to hear, was——'

'That you might rob me.'

'Rob you?'

'Yes, of the woman I love.'

'You will pardon my saying so, Cunningham, but you are making yourself a little ridiculous. How on earth was I to know that you loved Muriel Wingfield? You never told me so.'

'You did know it.'

'That I deny; but even supposing I did, your love for a woman does not compel that woman to love you. Muriel was free to be won. What law on earth was there to prevent my trying to win her?'

'There was honour to prevent you, but probably that does not appeal to you.'

'There was no question of honour in the matter. You are talking nonsense,' said Olroyd, flicking the ash from his cigar. 'The fact is you have met with a disappointment, and I am truly sorry for you; but don't, for goodness' sake,

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come accusing me of all sorts of crimes against you.'

'I repeat that you knew she loved me.'

'This is too absurd, it is really.'

'I am waiting for your explanation,' said Cunningham.

Olroyd shrugged his shoulders impatiently. 'My dear fellow, let me end this most unpleasant squabble at once by asking you a question. If Miss Wingfield loved you, how is it that she has promised to be my wife?'

'I will tell you. You have threatened her into it. There is some knowledge which you have, or which she thinks you have, with which you are compelling her to marry you. I mean to know what that secret is.'

'Compelling her to marry me! What do you mean?'

'I mean exactly what I say. I want the truth, and I will have it.'

'I think the best thing you can do is to call upon Miss Wingfield in the morning. I give you full permission to ask her to be your wife, and you will then most probably learn the truth from her. That is the most satisfactory way out of the difficulty; and as I am expecting a friend every moment, and you are not inclined to be

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sociable, I shall be glad, Cunningham, if you will go. I regret being compelled to take this tone with you, but your totally uncalled-for behaviour leaves me no choice.'

'I have already seen Miss Wingfield,' Cunningham said.

'Indeed!'

'All I want to know is the secret with which you have frightened her.'

'May I ask whether she told you there was a secret?'

'Her manner told me.'

'Mere fancies. I thought so. Sleep upon them, my dear fellow; you will find wisdom with a new day. Now I must really ask you to leave me. I will ring for my housekeeper to show you downstairs. The gas is very bad.'

He moved to the bell as he spoke, but Cunningham intercepted him.

'One moment. You have not yet answered my question.'

'To-night I decline to have anything further to say to you. Will you go?'

The two men stood close together, not a foot between them. They were both thoroughly aroused now, and looked each other fiercely in the face.

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'No, I will not. Your friend must wait. To-morrow you will return me all the papers belonging to Mr. Quixley which you have taken from the Gate House. Do you understand? You have nothing more to do with the case.'

'Very well.'

'I shall be glad to have your bill at once and done with it.'

'It shall be attended to to-morrow; and now, as this is not my office and these are not my business hours, perhaps you will kindly go, or I shall be obliged to put you out.'

'I'll go when you have told me the truth, not before. What do you know?'

'Nothing.'

'It is a lie,' said Cunningham.

'You'll bring it on yourself,' answered Olroyd fiercely, and he raised his hand as though to strike.

In a moment Cunningham had pinioned him.

'I mean to have the truth,' he hissed. 'Even if it is your life against mine, I mean to have it—for her sake.'

The thought of Muriel being bound to this man maddened him. Slow to anger as a rule, his rage had quite got the upper hand of him now, and Olroyd knew that the struggle was to be no

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child's play. He did not speak, but grappled with his opponent fiercely. He had this much right on his side—he was fighting in self-defence. He was the stronger man of the two, but Cunningham in his rage was no mean adversary. He was bent on unmasking a scoundrel, and he put out all his strength to do it.

'I will have it!' he said, and his hands were at Olroyd's throat.

'You fool! Do you want to kill me?'

Olroyd gripped his wrists with all his might to force him to relax his hold.

'The truth,' said Cunningham.

With an effort Olroyd twisted himself free, still holding Cunningham's wrists in a grip of iron.

'You shall have the truth, you fool! The reason for my silence, which I thought would be unpleasant to you, had nothing whatever to do with Muriel Wingfield. It was my doubt of you, of your truth, of your innocence; and, by Heaven! I had more reason for my doubt than I thought. You are a madman. Tell me the truth. Where is Mr. Quixley? Was it in this way, with your fingers at his throat, that you strangled him that night?'

'What!'

Olroyd flung him off

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OLROYD GRIPPED HIS WRISTS WITH ALL HIS MIGHT TO FORCE HIM TO RELAX HIS HOLD.

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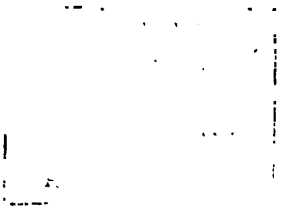

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'If you want the truth, begin by being truthful and look to yourself. Since that night you have been watched. Where is your uncle, Mr. Quixley? To-night I have learnt what a madman you can be.'

The sudden accusation staggered Cunningham. That a breath of suspicion could possibly rest upon him had never occurred to him. Was this the tale Olroyd had told Muriel?

Olroyd recognised his advantage.

'You had better go,' he said. 'I'll send you the papers to-morrow, and after to-night you will kindly consider that we are strangers. I would have done all I could to help you, but not now. And mark this, Cunningham: if you dare to attempt to renew your acquaintance with the Wingfields, I'll have no mercy on you. I will go to the police and tell them of your attempt on my life to-night; then prove to them that you know nothing about Mr. Quixley if you can.'

'You scoundrel!'

Mad with rage, Cunningham sprang towards his foe, and then stopped. His hand was raised to strike; Olroyd's arms were up to avoid the blow. Neither of them had heard the bell nor the footsteps ascending the stairs.

At that moment the door opened and the housekeeper announced 'Mr. Biedermann.'

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CHAPTER XVII

AN OFFER TO MR. BIEDERMANN

Both the hand raised to strike and the arm put up to defend were lowered as Mr. Biedermann entered the room, but the faces of the two men were too angrily set to change in a moment, and Mr. Biedermann was aware that he had arrived at an opportune time. The knowledge that these men were bitter enemies might be useful to him some day.

'Sorry to be late, Olroyd, but business—business, you know, must come first. I am afraid I disturbed you.'

Cunningham took up his hat.

'Our interview must be postponed,' he said. 'I shall expect the papers to-morrow.'

'You shall have the papers. If you are wise you will not attempt to renew the interview. I have already advised you in the matter.'

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Cunningham found it extremely difficult to leave the room in silence, but he did, having no desire to bring a stranger into their quarrel.

Mr. Biedermann, with a smile upon his lips, watched him go. As the door closed he whistled softly.

'An unwelcome visitor,' he remarked.

'Unexpected, but, as it happens, not unwelcome. In a few moments we have come to an understanding which in the ordinary course would have taken time and been rather tiresome to arrive at.'

'The last occasion I had the pleasure of seeing that gentleman happened to coincide with a fortunate day in your career,' said Biedermann, helping himself to whisky. 'It was the day you were able to use those bonds in exchange for the other securities you were pressed for, if you remember.'

'I had forgotten; but it happens, strangely enough, that it is about those very bonds I want to see you.'

'I had an idea it was. There was always an air of mystery about that transaction.'

'I am going to solve the mystery to-night,' Olroyd answered.

'You do not want the bonds back, I hope?'

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'That is exactly what I do want.'

'Are you paying the money?'

'Not immediately.'

'Then, my dear fellow, I am helpless,' said Biedermann. 'I am sorry, but so it is. The fact is, the money is wanted, Olroyd.'

'Wait until you have heard what I have got to say,' said Olroyd rather irritably.

'I am afraid it will make no difference, and be a waste of your time and mine; but go on.'

'To begin with, those bonds are not mine.'

'I am not altogether surprised to hear that.'

'Or perhaps I ought rather to say they are not mine yet. The property of the person to whom they belonged is destined all to become mine.'

'Indeed!'

Mr. Biedermann was incredulous, perhaps not without reason, considering the man with whom he had to deal.

'You do not believe it,' said Olroyd. 'I grant it is rather a romantic story. The bonds were left with me for safe custody by the late Mr. Quixley—of course, this is in confidence—and, Mr. Quixley being dead, I used them for the time being.'

'And attempted to deceive me,' said Biedermann.

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'Hardly that. I did not suppose you took all I said for granted, but you took the bonds. We have had a good many transactions together, and know each other pretty well. It is not wise always to put one's knowledge into words, is it?'

'Steady, Olroyd. I was not a party to the misappropriation of the bonds. It is because I know you so well that I wish that to be clearly understood to begin with.'

Olroyd smiled, and carelessly waved the objection away with his hand.

'You doubtless know that Mr. Quixley left a will which has not been found, or is supposed not to have been found? That will was signed in my office, and although I am not supposed to remember how the property was left, I do. The whole of it, except a few trifling legacies to servants, is left to Miss Wingfield, the charming daughter of your tenant in Silver Street, to whom your humble servant has the honour to inform you he is engaged.'

'But the will?'

'Is in my possession.'

'Does Miss Wingfield know?'

'Not yet. Oh, believe me, there is no point about that. The remarkable thing is how the will happened to come into my possession. While

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at the Gate House searching for it in every likely place—and unlikely one, for that matter—Mr. Cunningham, the gentleman who was here to-night, suggested one evening that I should look between the leaves of the books in his uncle's study. I did so, and found the will, as I have no doubt he intended I should do. He may have known the contents of the will from his uncle, but, at any rate, it is certain that he did know them.'

'Why want it found, then?'

'Because at the time he was convinced that Muriel Wingfield would marry him. He had seen a good deal of her, and, with that conceit which some men are born with, he translated her natural and open manner into one of love and devotion to himself. He went back to London confident that I had found the will, and believing the rest to be plain-sailing for him. He came back to find Muriel Wingfield and myself engaged to be married. Now do you understand the position?'

'It does you infinite credit, Olroyd.'

'One confession I feel bound to make,' Olroyd went on. 'Although the knowledge of the terms of the will had something—you smile—well, if you like, had a great deal to do with my seeking Miss Wingfield's acquaintance originally, it has

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had little or nothing to do with the present state of affairs. I fell desperately in love with her, and it is for love and nothing else that I am going to marry her. A humiliating confession for a man who has been pleased to consider himself a confirmed bachelor, isn't it?'

'Complicated, at least, if not actually true,' Biedermann answered. 'I'll take a little more whisky. It is exhausting to follow the subtle calculations of your mind.'

'Now you can understand Cunningham's presence here to-night. He came to demand an explanation, and before your arrival had attacked me savagely, and was about to renew the attack when you so opportunely came in. The assault served my purpose extremely well, however, as it gave me the opportunity of threatening him with the police should he attempt to renew his acquaintance with the Wingfields.'

'It also proves that he is no fool,' Biedermann returned. 'He has discovered what manner of man you are.'

Olroyd laughed, as though his companion had paid him a compliment.

'Poor fellow! To be quite honest, I am rather sorry for him. You see, I know what a charming girl he has lost.'

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'Just so, and an heiress into the bargain.'

'Certainly; that is the humorous side of it. You see, he had arranged it all so carefully. Of course, he would no more have thought of marrying her without the money than—than——'

'Than you would,' suggested Biedermann.

'That is unfair after my humiliating confession. Upon my word, Biedermann, after all my boasted strength against the little God of Love, my fall has made me go down in my own estimation. But the recompense, I must not forget that—Muriel.'

He emptied his glass by way of a toast, and sighed with satisfaction.

'A very interesting story, Olroyd, but it doesn't help us with regard to those bonds, does it?'

'Not help us! Mr. Quixley was wealthy.'

'Very likely; but these particular bonds, I take it, are wanted by someone, and you cannot produce them?'

'That is so. Mr. Quixley before he died left instructions with a London firm of solicitors to deal with these bonds, and they have written to me for them.'

'And you are in Queer Street.'

'Nonsense! With a fortune at my back?'

'Exactly, at your back and not get-at-able.'

'The wedding will take place without delay,

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and the rest you can safely leave to me. You must get those bonds for me, Biedermann.'

'My dear Olroyd, it is not a question of will —it is one of ability. As I told you, the money is wanted, and therefore it is not at all likely that an exchange of securities will be considered for a moment.'

'Then, raise the money for me and settle the business.'

'Your romance impresses upon me the fact that your security may be rather dangerous to deal with.'

'At least give me credit for one thing,' said Olroyd; 'nothing has ever gone wrong. Besides, we are friends of long standing, and I want you to participate in the stroke of good luck which has come to me. Name your price, and I will give you an undertaking to pay the sum within three months after my marriage.'

Mr. Biedermann did not jump at the offer, but after some persuasion he promised to do his best.

'It will take a few days,' he said, 'even if I succeed.'

'They asked for the bonds by return of post.'

'That is impossible, but I'll do my best. It would be a thousand pities if your wedding had

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to be postponed for a few months owing to your inability to be present. Few months! By Jove! it would be a few years, old chap. They do drop upon solicitors so nowadays.'

This parting remark left Mark Olroyd with a nasty sensation. It was not pleasant to have his transactions reviewed in so practical a manner. He always avoided doing so himself.

'I think he'll rise to the bait,' he said to himself when he was alone. 'It is his business to keep me on tenter-hooks for a little while; but I do not suppose the bonds are beyond the reach of one of the keys on his bunch. Now about Cunningham. He must have the papers to-morrow; but before I drop the case altogether I must inspect the contents of Quixley's house in Silver Street. I am convinced that it holds something against Mrs. Wingfield, and I must know it. My power over her is lamentably weak, if she only knew it; but the fact that she is afraid shows that there is much to find out. She has an idea, too, how Mr. Quixley has left his money. I wonder how she knows? I'll go and see the old bookseller early to-morrow.'

Next day Mr. Olroyd's clerks did not find him in such an amiable mood; indeed, he managed to show a good deal of temper to everybody, from

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the head-clerk down to the office-boy, before going to see Mr. Tuke.

'You want to go through the rubbish, eh?' said Mr. Tuke in reply to his inquiry. 'Oh, there is no objection. I was rather expecting a caller this morning, but he can wait. I am the recipient of some strange secrets, Mr. Olroyd. Now, I don't look the kind of individual a young fellow would confide his love affairs to, do I?'

'I do not understand a young man confiding such things to anybody.'

Mr. Tuke chuckled as he got the keys and put on his hat.

'Just so, but they do, all the same. The caller I am expecting did only yesterday. He was perfectly open about it; but there are some people who let me into their secrets without meaning to. You are one of that sort.'

'Indeed. What secret?'

'The same one—love.'

'You are a magician, Mr. Tuke, or news flies apace.'

Mr. Tuke pointed at Mrs. Wingfield's door.

'I guessed. I am a wonderful guesser. She's a nice girl, Mr. Olroyd.'

'Yes. I am at liberty to say that Miss Wing-

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field and I are engaged. Ah! I see your guessing had not led you quite so far as that.'

Mr. Tuke put the key into the lock. He did not know that affairs had progressed so rapidly.

'You'll be making a swell wedding of it, I suppose,' he said slowly,—'something for Docksmouth to talk about?'

'It will probably be very quiet,' Olroyd answered. 'I believe Mrs. Wingfield has few friends, and is, moreover, anything but wealthy. I propose to begin at the top of the house, Mr. Tuke, and work downwards.'

'As you please,' was the answer. 'I am in no hurry, but we'll not forget the ghosts. We can make a two days' job of it if necessary.'

The presence of Mr. Tuke did not prevent Olroyd's search being thorough. The bookseller watched him, but volunteered no suggestion, and did not talk except to answer the few questions put to him shortly and concisely. Nor did Olroyd ask his help. He wanted to go through the whole of the rubbish himself, confident there was something to be found. He worked with a will, too, knowing that after his conversation with Cunningham last night he had no right to be there at all.

Every book was inspected and well shaken to

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dislodge any papers which might lie hidden between the leaves. Every piece of old furniture, every drawer, was examined. Every case was broken open, and its contents looked through. Mr. Tuke was at a loss to know what it was Olroyd expected to find, but he said nothing as his companion went systematically about his task.

Room after room was gone through, and twilight was unmistakably creeping in at the windows as the rooms on the ground-floor were reached.

'You will not finish to-day?' said Mr. Tuke, as they descended the stairs.

'We will do this one,' said Olroyd, entering the room evidently meant to be the dining-room, 'and leave the rest until to-morrow.'

He set to work at once upon a heap of books in one corner.

There was something to be found out, he was sure of that. What was it? Disappointed with his ill-success so far, he did not despair, but worked on with a will; and leaning against the wall, with his spectacles pushed up on to his forehead, and a wisp of paper between his lips, Mr. Tuke silently watched him.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE UNOPENED CASE

MURIEL'S visit to the third breakwater was known to nobody in the house but Mary. She had heard Muriel go out, and she contrived to be in the hall when she returned, hoping to discover the result of the interview in her young mistress's face. Muriel's face, however, told her nothing.

'Quite chilly this evening, ain't it, miss?'

'Is it, Mary? I had not noticed it particularly.'

'It's not to be expected you would, with so much else to think about. Was the note all right, miss?'

'Yes.'

'I'm glad you went. Men take on so if we women don't do exactly as they want us to. Queer things, men, ain't they, miss?'

Muriel effectually put an end to the conversation by going upstairs.

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Mary was disappointed at her mistress's refusal to confide in her—after she had brought the note, too—but this was not her only disappointment. Tramp was not at home. The reappearance of Ralph Cunningham upon the scene had given the romance a new interest, and the little servant was simply bubbling over with ideas and fancies to impart to Mr. Tramp. It was particularly hard that she should have the kitchen to herself that evening.

For the first time since the migration to Docksmouth, Tramp had remained away all night. One of his roving fits was upon him, and he did not return until late in the afternoon. Mrs. Wingfield happened to be in the kitchen when he came in.

'I thought you had given up this kind of thing,' she said.

'It comes over me, and then I go, and that's the end of it,' he answered sullenly. He was usually sullen after these fits.

Mrs. Wingfield herself was out of temper. Muriel's refusal to look upon her engagement as a temporary arrangement was the chief cause.

'I wish everyone to know of it,' Muriel had said. 'The sooner I get used to the idea, the better.'

'But, my dear——'

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'I wish it, mother.' And under the circumstances Mrs. Wingfield could say no more.

In consequence the little servant had had anything but a quiet life that day, and was, in fact, being scolded when Tramp came in. Mrs. Wingfield never got angry with Tramp.

'There's been a long interval this time,' she said.

'Has there? Time ain't of no consequence to me.'

Mrs. Wingfield turned to leave the kitchen, but stopped at the door.

'There's is one thing I had better tell you both before you hear it from outside. Miss Muriel is engaged to Mr. Mark Olroyd.'

'Lor', mum, you don't say so!'

Mary forgot all about the scoldings in the face of this exciting information.

'What is there to be surprised at, Mary?'

'I thought it was going to be the other one, mum.'

'Whom do you mean?'

'Mr. Cunningham, please, mum.'

'You are a foolish girl with a foolish head full of foolish fancies.'

'Yes, mum, and, unfortunately, he's the same, mum. I'm real sorry for him.'

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'What makes you think that?'

'See it in his looks, mum, same as you must have seen it in mine. Poor gentleman! I wonder if he'll kill himself. They do sometimes. Tempory unsound the jury calls it when they sit on him. I've read it in the papers scores o' times.'

'Get on with your work, and don't talk nonsense,' was the short answer.

'Is it all settled?' asked Tramp before Mrs. Wingfield could leave the kitchen.

'Quite.'

'No chance of undoing of it?'

'No. Why do you ask?'

''Cos you've been took in, that's why. He ain't no good. I wouldn't trust him with a cartload o' rotten cabbages, let alone the missy yonder.'

'Why not?'

''Cos he's a wrong un.'

'My good man, tell me why. Give me a reason.'

Tramp looked at her, and then at Mary.

'I've got a secret,' he said solemnly.

Mary stood with open mouth, a plate in one hand, a dish-cloth in the other. The expression on Mrs. Wingfield's face did not change, but she was interested.

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'While he was at Dean I went up to the Gate House one night after it was shut. It came into my head sudden-like that I could find Mr. Quixley. I climbed the wall, and I went and looked through a window.'

Mary dropped the plate, making them all start, but Mrs. Wingfield was too interested to even think of scolding her.

'I didn't see Mr. Quixley, but I saw this Mr. Olroyd looking through a lot o' books, and presently he comes to one which he takes something out of, and takes to the light to look more carefully at.'

'A letter—an envelope about that size?' asked Mrs. Wingfield hurriedly.

'Maybe it was about that size. He was mighty interested, and turns it over and over until he looks up and catches a sight o' me. My word, you ought to 'a' seen him then! I see a man once copped for stealing, a new un at the game he was, and he turned like death, just what this Mr. Olroyd did. Maybe he'd been stealing.'

There was a look of triumph in Mrs. Wingfield's eyes, but she said quietly:

'He had a right there, Tramp. It was his business to look through Mr. Quixley's papers.'

'Why was he afraid, then?'

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'You startled him, that was all.'

Tramp shook his head.

'He's a wrong un. Don't you let the missy yonder marry the likes o' him.'

Mary suddenly found her voice, and made a practical suggestion.

'As he's now one of the family, mum, why not ask him what it was he found?'

'Perhaps I will when I see him.'

Mrs. Wingfield was not answering her servant so much as making up her own mind to ask Mr. Olroyd awkward questions.

'You can do it at once. He's only in next door. He's been there most of the day.'

'Next door!'

The exclamation came so sharply that it had much the same effect as the falling plate had had a few moments before.

'I see him go in along with Mr. Tuke this morning. Perhaps he's gone to see if there's anything there, same as he did at the Gate House.'

Mrs. Wingfield turned and left the kitchen without answering. Mark Olroyd in the next house! Her face flushed crimson, and then paled suddenly, as she stood for a moment at the head of the cellar stairs to make sure that neither

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Mary nor Tramp had followed her. Then she went down, locking the door on the inside after her. It could not matter who knew that she had locked herself in the cellar now. At that moment it did not seem to her as if anything mattered. Her whole life seemed to be concentrated into one point of it—a point which lay somewhere in the future, but how far in the future she could not tell. Within a few moments that future might be the present.

She crossed to the space behind the partition from which Muriel had seen the shadow cast that other night, and, kneeling down, began to pull away the bricks which, with much silent labour, she had dislodged during many nights' work. She worked with feverish haste, but very quietly, until there was a small opening near the ground, through which she crawled upon her hands and knees, and then stood upright in the cellars underneath Mr. Quixley's house.

Silently she ascended the stairs and opened the door at the top of them. There were voices in the room above, and she waited, looking and listening from the half-open door.

How long she stood there fearing to move, yet so anxious to hear what was said, and know what was done, that discovery seemed preferable to

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retreat, she did not know. Never, surely, had moments been so long. It seemed as though the voices upstairs had been silent for hours, but at intervals came the sound of falling books as they were cast aside, and the splitting of wood as some packing-case was wrenched open.

Then came heavy footsteps descending the stairs.

'You will not finish to-day,' said someone.

'We will do this one, and leave the rest until to-morrow.'

It was Mark Olroyd who spoke. Mrs. Wingfield recognised his voice.

She had drawn back as the two men came into the hall; now she crept along the passage until she could see through the banisters into the room. Only Mark Olroyd was visible, and his back was towards her as he bent to examine a pile of books in the corner. These finished, he turned to some parcels which lay on the top of two packing-cases, and carefully opened them one after another.

'It is getting dark.'

'Plenty of light to finish here,' was Olroyd's answer, as, with a chisel, he ripped open the top case.

The watching woman pressed her hand to her heart to try and quiet its furious beating.

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'More books—more rubbish, I expect,' said Olroyd.

'I expect so,' came the answer, in a tone that implied that, whether it was rubbish or not, it was not likely to interest the speaker.

Volume after volume was taken from the case, looked at, and then thrown aside. How slow the worker seemed to the watching woman! Twenty, thirty, forty books he had taken out—she had counted them. How many more were there in the case? She grew paler. Her rapid heart-beats seemed to stop altogether for a space, and then galloped on again so fast that her trembling hands clutched the banisters for support.

'One more case, and enough for to-night,' said Olroyd, as he pushed off the now empty case to get at the one underneath. It was stouter than the other, and had a black triangle with a number in the centre, some trade-mark, roughly painted on the end of it. The woman's staring eyes, as though something compelled them, were fixed upon that triangle.

It was difficult to get the chisel under the covering boards, they were nailed down so closely and firmly; but it slipped in at last, and Olroyd was in the act of wrenching them up, when he paused and started.

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The other man in the room evidently started, too, for his boots scraped the floor sharply.

The woman by the stairs started and clutched her throat tightly with her fingers to prevent herself calling out.

'Who's that?' said Olroyd, rising from his kneeling position.

Even as he spoke the sharp and angry double knock at the street door was repeated.

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CHAPTER XIX

MRS. WINGFIELD ASSERTS HERSELF

MR. TUKE, after his first surprise, was practical.

'The only way to find out is to open the door and see,' he said, as he came into the hall.

The woman had retreated towards the cellar stairs the moment before. It was quite dusk now, and in the shadow she waited and listened unseen.

'You, Mr. Cunningham!'

Mr. Tuke spoke as though he had quite made up his mind who the visitor was, and was much surprised to find himself mistaken.

'They told me at your shop that Mr. Olroyd was here.'

'So he is.'

Without a word Cunningham strode past him and entered the room.

'What is the meaning of this?' he demanded.

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'I had arranged with Mr. Tuke to go through these cases, and thought I had better do so.'

It was a lame excuse, and Olroyd was conscious of the fact.

'I was under the impression that you were told the case was taken out of your hands.'

'I was, but——'

'Then, you are trespassing,' said Cunningham, pointing to the door.

Olroyd opened his mouth to speak, but after a moment's indecision came to the conclusion that silence was best under the circumstances, the advantage of the position was so entirely with his adversary. He slowly buttoned up his coat and fixed his hat firmly upon his head.

'Good-day, Mr. Tuke. I am sorry to have given you so much trouble.'

'Good-day. A pleasure,' said the bookseller, stepping out of the doorway to let him pass; but whether he meant that saying good-day was a pleasure or that the trouble had been a pleasure it was impossible to tell.

Olroyd was careful to close the door gently behind him, wishing to convey thereby that he departed rather in pity than in anger.

'Please understand, Mr. Tuke, that Mr. Olroyd

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has nothing to do with my uncle's affairs now. I do not think it is necessary to give my reasons for taking the case out of his hands.'

'Quite unnecessary. I know them.'

'I think not.'

'Mr. Olroyd is engaged to the young lady you were inquiring about yesterday.'

'Hardly a sufficient reason for my action.'

'Perhaps not; still, I think you have done the right thing.'

Ralph Cunningham was not in the mood to be patronized just now.

'Your approval is most gratifying,' he said sarcastically.

'Then, do not take it ill, Mr. Cunningham. The lookers-on see most of the game, and can often give the players good advice. I repeat, I think you have done right in dismissing Mr. Olroyd, and you might remember that he is not married to Miss Wingfield yet.'

'She has promised to marry him. I had it from her own lips.'

'You have seen her, then?'

'Yes, last night.'

'And afterwards went to see Mr. Olroyd, I suppose?'

'I did.'

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'So that is why he came to look through the rubbish to-day.'

'What was he looking for?'

'I haven't the slightest idea; but whatever it was, he didn't find it. Do you want to continue his work?'

'No.'

'He had got to this case, you see,' said Mr. Tuke, pulling out the chisel which Olroyd had left sticking in. 'Shall we go?'

Cunningham went into the hall.

'What was that?' he said, stopping suddenly.

'What?'

'I thought I heard a door close gently.'

'A latch slipped somewhere. Perhaps I did not close one of the doors upstairs securely.'

Cunningham left the house satisfied with the explanation, and remained satisfied until later in the evening. Two persons unconnected with this history, having occasion to pass through Silver Street that night, saw the ghosts, and told the news to the loungers in the bar of the Blue Lion; and a waiter, glad to have an excuse for a gossip, as waiters always are, imparted the news to Ralph Cunningham as he sat in his room enjoying a final cigar before going to bed. The information troubled him. What was the mystery connected

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with Mr. Quixley's house? Olroyd evidently thought there was one, as he had gone to a great deal of trouble to try and discover it; indeed, had probably found out something of it, and had used his knowledge for the purpose of frightening Muriel Wingfield. Did Mr. Tuke know? Cunningham did not understand the bookseller. In accounting for the sound he had heard that afternoon, Mr. Tuke might have been wilfully misleading him. Still, he could not deny that in the main the bookseller seemed to have his interests at heart.

'I shall have to make a search myself,' he said. 'If I can only discover with what knowledge that villain has frightened Muriel, I shall be contented.'

The news of the ghosts was imparted to Mary early next morning, and she lost no time in conveying the information to Mrs. Wingfield. Strange to say, Mrs. Wingfield was not angry, nor did she accuse the little servant of foolishness.

'It is quite right to tell me, Mary,' she said. 'Should you see anyone go into the house next door—anyone, no matter who it may be—let me know at once.'

Mary was delighted. Her labours towards the

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unravelling of the mystery were to bear fruit at last—her help was being asked for, and her place in the romance was definitely recognised. These considerations were so all-important to her that such trivialities as her household duties and the necessity of preparing dinner were matters of very secondary moment. She forgot the potatoes altogether, and did not begin to lay the cloth until three-quarters of an hour after the usual time.

Such a delay did not matter to Muriel at any time, and to-day Mrs. Wingfield did not notice it. She had sat all the morning at the window working. She was so busy that she could not spare time to eat her dinner. Muriel gave her a glass of wine, and with that Mrs. Wingfield was satisfied.

'Are you not well, mother?'

'Quite well, but not hungry.'

Muriel remained silent, but she looked at her mother from time to time. It cannot be said that Mrs. Wingfield was restless. She sat perfectly still, hardly changing her position at all, yet there was a restless expression in her face. It was impossible to read her thoughts, but it was easy to see that they were disquieting ones, and that they followed one another swiftly through her brain.

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Now her brow was puckered, now it cleared for a moment, and then became so puckered again as almost to render the face unrecognisable. Her work progressed little. For a few moments the needle would flash in and out of the material rapidly, and then for a long period it would be held in the air while the worker stared out of the window.

'What are you so busy about, mother?'

'Clothing—winter clothing.'

'Winter! But the summer is young yet.'

'Delay is dangerous, Muriel;' and then Mrs. Wingfield laughed, a strange laugh. 'Winter clothing, my dear; I fancy the summer is going to be a short one.'

The answer startled Muriel, accompanied as it was by that strange laugh. This was a new mood for her mother to be in.

'I am sure you are not well, mother,' she said.

'Perfectly well, but not hungry.'

She said it as though she were repeating some formula.

The hall bell rang.

'Here is Mr. Olroyd,' said Mrs. Wingfield. 'You will see him, Muriel?'

'Of course, mother.'

'Do not make him any special promises,

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Muriel, no matter what he asks. I wish to see him before he goes. Will you tell him so?'

'Yes,' Muriel answered as she left the room.

Mrs. Wingfield continued to sit at the window, and presently Mary came in to clear away the dinner.

'Nobody has gone in next door, mum,' she said.

'You have watched?'

'Yes, mum.'

'No one is likely to go in, Mary.'

'No, mum, only it's the unlikely things what happen, isn't it?'

The little servant's profound assertion seemed to impress her mistress. Was it true? Was it the unexpected which usually happened? The thought made her restless, and she got up and walked sharply up and down the room once or twice. The unexpected had surely happened last evening when Ralph Cunningham's coming had put an end to Mark Olroyd's investigations. There had been ghosts in the house since then. What had they been looking for? Mrs. Wingfield hurried back to her seat at the window, lest anyone should enter the house next door while she was not watching. Her nerves were at keen tension to-day, stretched almost to the breaking-

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point. She was alive to every sound within the house and without, yet the knock which came at the door presently startled her.

Mark Olroyd entered. 'Muriel tells me you want to see me.'

Mrs. Wingfield motioned him to a chair without leaving her seat at the window.

'What did you expect to find when you searched the house next door yesterday?'

The question was unexpected. He wondered how Mrs. Wingfield knew he had been there, but he did not show his astonishment.

'It was my duty to go through Mr. Quixley's effects,' he said quietly.

'And you found——'

'Nothing.'

'That must have been a disappointment. What did you expect to find?'

'Nothing in particular.'

Mrs. Wingfield smiled. 'I thought you might have been looking for something to give you a greater hold over me, Mr. Olroyd.'

Had not Olroyd been very much upon his guard, this hitting the truth so exactly would have disconcerted him. As it was, he only smiled as blandly as Mrs. Wingfield did.

'No—oh dear no! Muriel has caused me to

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forget all I ever knew against you, Mrs. Wingfield.'

'Then, perhaps you were looking for the missing will?' she said after a pause.

'No.'

'You have found it already?'

'You are imaginative.'

'My nature, Mr. Olroyd.'

'Mr. Cunningham may have been putting ideas into your head. He is in Docksmouth, I hear. You do not contemplate throwing me over in favour of Ralph Cunningham, I suppose?'

'No.'

'I am glad of that. I have been talking to Muriel about our wedding. I see no reason for delay, do you, Mrs. Wingfield?'

'I see no reason for hurry, either.'

'When a man is in love, and——'

'Oh yes, I know all about that,' she interrupted. 'I mean any other reason.'

'How can there be any other?'

'You might be in want of money, for instance.'

'I fail to see how my marriage with Muriel would help me in that respect.'

Olroyd regretted the remark the moment he had made it. Mrs. Wingfield's sudden laughter

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showed him that she knew at least something of his motives. How much did she know?

'I seem to amuse you,' he said.

'You do greatly. You so entirely overlook the fact that others may be as sharp as you, and take as much trouble to worm themselves into their neighbours' secrets as you do.'

'Other people's secrets are my business, Mrs. Wingfield.'

'You came upon a useful one the night you found Mr. Quixley's will at the Gate House.'

'Who told you I had found it?'

'No one, but I know you did find it.'

They looked at each other as two skilful fencers may, seeking to know at what point the adversary's defence is weakest.

'They were not your eyes which looked in at the window that night,' said Olroyd. 'I have been wondering ever since whose they were. You can doubtless tell me.'

'I have no intention of doing so, at any rate. Enough, you found the will and suppressed it.'

'Quite true. I thought it wise, seeing the mystery there was concerning Mr. Quixley; but I was also wise enough to take certain people into my confidence. Your insinuation only proves how very wise I was. Now, who can

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have betrayed my confidence? Was it Mr. Biedermann?'

'I repeat, no one told me; but I know you found the will, and I know that is why you want to marry Muriel.'

'Indeed! Then, you know the contents of the will?'

'I do.'

'How?'

In attacking her enemy Mrs. Wingfield had been careless of her own guard.

'You are playing with edged tools,' he said sternly. 'You dare not answer my question. You had better let the marriage take place immediately, Mrs. Wingfield, and cease to question my actions.'

'I dare answer the question,' she returned. 'I know the contents of that will because Mr. Quixley himself told me them.'

Olroyd smiled and shook his head. 'You are a clever woman, Mrs. Wingfield, but I am not quite a fool. I have a wonderful faculty for recognising the truth when I hear it. Better hurry on the marriage, and so seal my lips for ever.'

He turned to go, but she laid a detaining hand upon his arm. What had occurred yester-

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day had strengthened her position so far as this man was concerned.

'One moment, Mr. Olroyd. I am not so completely in your hands as you imagine. There is no need for a hasty marriage. I very much doubt whether you have any idea of my secret at all, and I am also doubtful whether it is worth my while to keep the secret any longer. Confession would be a little awkward for me, I admit, but if I choose to confess it will be more awkward for you, won't it?'

She spoke very quietly. How much did she know? Olroyd could not determine. Her exceeding coolness had given her the upper hand.

'Am I to continue my search next door?' he asked angrily.

'Certainly. Shall I send Mary round to Mr. Tuke for the keys?'

She looked at him mockingly.

'You are not quite yourself to-day, Mrs. Wingfield. Remember, I desire an early marriage. That is now the price of my silence.'

She burst out laughing as he left the room. It was a laugh which startled him, a laugh which rang in his ears even after he had passed out of Silver Street.

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CHAPTER XX

IN THE MOONLIGHT

MRS. WINGFIELD made an effort to stop her laughter, succeeded for a moment, and then, as though a still more humorous aspect of the situation had struck her, burst out laughing again. Repeated fits of laughter shook her, almost, it seemed, against her will, for some time after Mark Olroyd had passed out of Silver Street. It must have been laughter which hurt her, too, for though the lines of her face were creased and wrinkled with it, there was a look of pain, and her eyes were fixed, no semblance of even a smile in them.

In the midst of a paroxysm she broke off.

The door had opened, and Muriel stood there.

'Mother, what is the matter?'

'Nothing, nothing.'

'I heard your laughter at the top of the house.'

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'Better than hearing sobs, Muriel—much better than hearing sobs.'

'What has made you laugh so?'

'Mr. Olroyd was so—so humorous. I am better now.'

By degrees Mrs. Wingfield became her usual self, but Muriel did not leave her.

'I am sure you are not well to-day, mother,' she said.

'Perhaps you are right, Muriel. I will go to bed early.'

'Do, mother.'

'It was absurd of me to be so amused. What did Mark Olroyd say to you this afternoon? Did he ask you to consent to an early marriage?'

'He spoke of that amongst other things.'

'You did not consent?'

'I neither consented nor refused.'

'Do not consent, Muriel.' And then she went on quickly as her daughter was interrupting her: 'No, my child, listen to me. He has deceived both of us. It is little he knows, perhaps nothing at all. Directly—to-morrow, perhaps—there will be nothing to know; but if not to-morrow, all necessity for secrecy will have gone soon. So play with him, Muriel; keep him in uncertainty for a little while longer. Why should you wreck

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your life by giving yourself to a scoundrel like Mark Olroyd?'

'You know the true reason, mother; I only know that you are in danger.'

'What danger?' said Mrs. Wingfield.

'You will not tell me, and I dare not guess.'

'Sit down beside me, Muriel. I was in danger, a little danger—only a little danger, remember—and I was cowardly. When Mark Olroyd said he knew my secret he took me unawares, and I was afraid. Now the danger is gone, or almost gone, and I do not believe he ever knew my secret.'

'But those papers at the bonfire that night?'

'Hush! They were nothing. I could have explained, only you would not have understood just then.'

'But, mother, they were——'

'They were nothing, I tell you—nothing, nothing, nothing!'

Mrs. Wingfield's voice rose in sharp anger as she said it, and Muriel looked at her in wonder. The change was so sudden and unexpected.

'I do not mean to be angry,' she said, as suddenly becoming calm again. 'My interview with that villain has tried me. Forgive me, Muriel; I did not mean to be angry.'

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'No. Have Tramp and Mary gone to bed?'

'Yes, mother.'

'And you are going yourself?'

'Yes.'

'Good-night, Muriel. Put out the candle, and arrange the blind a little. The moon shines in so.'

Muriel did so, and she noticed her mother's clothes beside the bed particularly.

'Good-night,' she whispered.

'Good-night,' came the sleepy answer.

Then the door closed and Mrs. Wingfield was alone. She lay quite still, but was as keenly alive to sounds within the house and without as she had been that afternoon when sitting at the window. She had great patience. For an hour she lay there listening, sometimes smiling to herself.

'It is safe now,' she said presently, as she stepped quietly from the bed. She took off her nightgown and put on a short dressing-jacket, slipped her feet into a thin pair of slippers, and pulled on her stockings over them. 'Matches,' she murmured, and put a box in her pocket. 'Is there anything else? No.'

She answered herself deliberately. Every detail had been considered.

There was no sound as she turned the handle

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of the door. Long ago the lock had been well oiled to make such secret midnight excursions as these possible; but surely she had never gone on such a one as this!

She went downstairs quickly, and to the cellar door. On the steps she turned and locked the door behind her, and smiled to think how cleverly she had managed everything.

There was a candle standing on a wine-case behind one of the partitions, which she lighted. Then she took a crowbar, leaning against the wall, and with it prised open two stone flags in the floor. They came up easily, having been prepared days ago. Below them was a hole six feet long, about two and a half feet wide, and three feet deep. It was dry and empty. She put down the crowbar, and went to make sure that a spade lay on a heap of earth in the corner, and that there was a small sack beside it full of something irregular. She smiled again to think how excellently everything was arranged.

Then she went on her hands and knees, and quickly and silently removed the bricks in the wall which divided the cellar from the one in the next house. This done, she blew out the light.

'I will take it in case of accident,' she said; 'but the moon will serve.'

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Her wide-open eyes stared at that splash of light at the head of the stairs.

Pat-pat! How long it was in coming! What was it? Footsteps, soft footsteps, slowly and deliberately coming down.

Suddenly a white face, a man's face, gleamed palely in the moonlight. Pat-pat came the slow footsteps, and a white hand came stealing down the banisters.

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CHAPTER XXI

MRS. WINGFIELD'S EXPLANATION

No cry of terror rang through the house. Dumb fear had clutched the woman's heart, and she shrank back out of the moonlight at the foot of the stairs as the white hand came slowly creeping down the banisters towards her—shrank back into the darkness. Then she turned and fled, stumbled down the cellar steps, the pat-pat of those ghostly feet following her. She rushed across the cellar and crawled through the hole in the wall, dragging the sack after her. In her own cellar she dropped the sack and managed to climb the steps and unlock the door. Then, for the first time, she cried out and fell upon her knees, for another white face was before her.

'Mother!'

Waking suddenly out of sleep and feeling nervous, Muriel had gone to her mother's room

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only a few moments before, and not finding her there had gone to the cellar. She had only just discovered that the door was locked on the inside when she heard the stumbling feet coming up the stairs.

'Mother!'

It was some time before the name had any meaning for the trembling and prostrate woman. She looked up with wide-opened eyes into her daughter's face, but they were eyes which had no recognition in them. Then a sudden strength came to her and she stood up.

'No one else has come?'

'No.'

Mrs. Wingfield locked the door and took the key. 'You are sure nobody followed me?'

'Quite sure, mother.'

'Come away quickly, Muriel,' and she took her daughter's hand. 'Light the lamp. It is evil in the dark.'

Muriel lit a lamp in the dining-room.

'Give me a little brandy, Muriel.'

Muriel gave her some and stood waiting.

'Don't leave me. Listen!'

There was not a sound in the house.

'I thought it tried the cellar door,' said Mrs. Wingfield.

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'Who was it, mother?'

Mrs. Wingfield looked at her vaguely for a moment, and then laughed, not wildly, but softly as though some remembrance pleased her.

Muriel stood beside her waiting. It would not do to question her mother just now, her brain was too overwrought.

'Lie down on the sofa, dear, and I will sit beside you.'

Without a protest Mrs. Wingfield drank a little more of the brandy and lay down. Muriel covered her feet with a rug.

'You may sleep.'

'You will not leave me?'

'No, dear.'

The exhaustion, together with the brandy, which Muriel had given to her strong, caused Mrs. Wingfield to fall into a troubled sleep presently. She started violently at intervals, and pain-marks came into and vanished from her face. Once she laughed a little, and then sobbed.

Muriel sat beside her and watched her. Fears for herself had vanished in her fears for her mother. She was calm enough to think of the morrow and what must be done then. What was this terrible secret which her mother had been

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keeping so long? Would it be safe to send for a doctor?

It was a weary night of watching and waiting, and the gray dawn came slowly, as it ever does to sleepless eyes and anxious hearts. Much would depend upon the state of her mother's mind when she woke up, and the longer she slept, the better. She was sleeping more quietly now. Perhaps after last night Muriel might be able to persuade her to tell her the secret. If she only would! Better anything than this terrible uncertainty.

It grew light, and Muriel turned the lamp out. Still Mrs. Wingfield slept, and so peacefully that Muriel wondered if the secret could be so terrible, after all. Might not her mother have greatly exaggerated it in her own mind, and by constantly thinking over it frightened herself out of all reason?

'I may have greatly misunderstood mother's character,' she said to herself. 'With all her apparent strength of will and determination, she may be highly fanciful and nervous.'

'What are you thinking of, Muriel?'

Her mother had opened her eyes, and was looking at her steadily.

'Of you, mother dear.'

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Mrs. Wingfield took her hand.

'I frightened you last night.'

'Yes. Do you remember what happened?'

'Everything.'

'Would it not be better to tell me all, mother dear? You know there is nothing in the world can make any difference between us. If the burden is hard to bear, it will surely lighten it if you share it with me. You do not know how strong I am to bear anything—anything.'

'I will tell you, Muriel.'

'Now, mother?'

'You shall know everything after breakfast,' Mrs. Wingfield answered.

After the excitement of last night Muriel was astonished at her mother's calmness. She went to her room and dressed, and at breakfast talked as if nothing had happened. Afterwards she gave her orders to Mary as though the day were to be an ordinary one, with no momentous secret to be told. She sat back in her chair when Mary had gone, and closed the door, and she took the key of the cellar and put it upon the table.

'We shall want that presently.'

Muriel waited.

'The secret really began long ago, Muriel. When I was young—your age—I was accounted

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pretty. I was not as pretty as you are, but pretty enough for two men to fall in love with me. One was your father ; the other was Stephen Quixley.'

'Mr. Quixley of the Gate House?'

Mrs. Wingfield nodded.

'He and your father were friends—business friends. Your father was ever an honourable man, but too trustful that everyone was as honest as himself. Mr. Quixley was—well, more businesslike. From the moment of my marriage he set to work to ruin my husband, and he succeeded, Muriel. Your father became a bankrupt, and it killed him. You and I were left to starve.'

'And I have confessed to liking this man,' said Muriel between her teeth.

'Then Mr. Quixley came to me to complete my humiliation,' Mrs. Wingfield went on, taking no notice of her daughter's remark. 'He offered to allow me two hundred a year, and to let me live in the cottage at Dean ; and I accepted his offer on condition that I paid the rent of the cottage.'

'Oh, mother, how could you!'

'He had ruined and killed my husband, and his object was to humiliate me. My object was to ruin him, to bring him to the ground, to kill him if necessary.' Muriel started. 'The thought of

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killing him came later. Ruin would be far worse to him than death, for Stephen Quixley worshipped his own business ability and his capacity for making money. I came to Dean submissively, and while I let him believe that I was willing to do anything for him as some return for his kindness to me, I was ever watching for my opportunity, always eager to learn any detail concerning him that I could. He had retired from business when he came to the Gate House, but with all his wealth could not help bargaining and making money whenever the chance offered. He bought books, bric-à-brac, armour, tapestry, and all such things—you know how the Gate House was filled with them—and he resold much that was of value. I have heard him chuckle many a time at getting a rare book in a parcel which had cost him little, and he constantly taunted me by saying that I should have done better to marry him.'

'Did he ask you to marry him after father's death?'

'No, Muriel. In his bargaining I was of certain use to him. Some of the rubbish which he did not want to keep at the Gate House he sent to be stored in the house next door, and some parcels he sent away to be sold, and they were sent to Mr. Tuke, the bookseller at the

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corner of this street. At one time Mr. Tuke's house and Mr. Quixley's next door were all one, and to this day the cellars communicate; so the parcels delivered at Mr. Tuke's shop for storage were taken through the cellars and deposited next door. These parcels and cases Tramp invariably delivered in my cart when he took my garden stuff to Mrs. Chenneby's.'

Muriel did not speak, but sat looking steadily at her mother. She was beginning to understand.

'The cases were delivered to Tramp always in the evening at the entrance to the Gate House which opens on to the field, so that I do not suppose anyone in Dean ever saw them being put into the cart, and they often remained in the cart in my shed two or three days before going to Docksmouth. This was no arrangement of mine, but of Mr. Quixley's. Nothing pleased him so much as doing things in a secret way. So week after week, month after month, year after year, I waited for my revenge. It seemed as far off as ever. Stephen Quixley was mean, miserly, and eccentric, but, for all the village gossip that there was some story behind him, I could find out nothing beyond what I already knew. It was then that the thought of killing him came into

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my mind, but it was put aside, Muriel. I do not think I ever really considered it seriously.'

For the first time Mrs. Wingfield spoke eagerly, leaning forward in her chair. Then she remained silent for a few moments.

'Certainly nothing was further from my thoughts, when the opportunity for revenge came suddenly. It was the night you brought Ralph Cunningham to the cottage.'

'That night! But Mr. Quixley was ill in bed then.'

'Not so ill as they thought him, and not in bed. He was ill. That accounted for everything. But about eight o'clock, while I was waiting for you, Mr. Quixley came to the cottage. It was snowing hard then. All traces of his footsteps to my door must have been obliterated within the next hour.'

Again Mrs. Wingfield paused, a little longer than before.

'I was surprised to see him—almost sorry, I think, to see him so feeble. At any rate, I drew a chair to the fire for him, and not until the snow had dried from his clothes, and he had ceased to tremble so much, did I ask him what he had come for. Conscience had brought him, he said, and I laughed. I could not help it, seeing that I

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knew what little conscience he had. But he did not turn and taunt me. He went through the whole history of our lives—of my marriage, of his connection with my husband. He confessed that for revenge he had taken advantage of his trustfulness to drag him into speculations foredoomed to failure. "Some time ago I started to make amends," he went on. "I have left all my money to your daughter Muriel, and for you I have bought bonds. There they are, five thousand pounds, and there is the will." He placed the bonds and a sealed envelope upon the table as he spoke. He said that the bonds were my property now, and the will he had brought to show me, so that I might know he was telling me the truth. He took up the envelope in his trembling hands to break the seal, but I stopped him. This man had ruined my husband, had made me suffer for years, had humiliated me—was it likely that money would satisfy me now? No, a thousand times no! But I did not think of killing him. "What made you come to-night—to-night of all others?" I asked. "I am weak and ill," he answered, and I was reading a book which made me long to hear words of comfort and forgiveness. I was obliged to come, even if it killed me." "Words of forgiveness!" I exclaimed. "Because

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you give me five thousand pounds, and leave your miserable money to my daughter!" I do not know what I said, but my anger was great, and I spoke out all I had felt for years. He was feeble, and my rage frightened him. The heart was out of Stephen Quixley that night, and I rejoiced to see him shrink back afraid. I took up the bonds and thrust them savagely in his face. I do not think my hand struck him at all, but he recoiled, and, overbalancing the chair, fell backwards, striking his head upon the hearth. A miserable, miserly little scoundrel he looked, Muriel, as he lay there.'

'Oh, mother!' said Muriel, hiding her face in her hands.

'But I did not want to kill him even then. I bent down to raise him. I could have lifted him without much difficulty. He was a small man, you remember, Muriel. He never moved. I half raised him, and then stopped. He was heavy in my arms. That heaviness made me pause and look in his face, and put my hand over his heart and then lay him down again, and rise from my knees to think. He was dead, Muriel!'

'But it was an accident, mother.'

'I looked at the bonds lying beside him, and the will upon the table, and I knew how I hated

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him. Would the world believe it to be an accident? I thought it unlikely, Indeed, was it altogether an accident? I felt a fierce delight for a moment when he first fell. I knew that, and I could hardly say to myself that it was accidental. I stood thinking. Mary had gone to bed, and I listened to hear if she were stirring. Tramp had gone on one of his wanderings, and might return at any moment. You might come in. My one idea was to hide him away.'

'How foolish, mother — oh, how foolish!' moaned Muriel.

Mrs. Wingfield took no notice of her daughter. She went on in a dead, level tone of voice, as though she were reciting a story to herself, with no listener to hear it:

'Two or three days before Tramp had fetched a case from the Gate House. It was in the cart in the shed at that moment. I looked at the dead man and saw how small he was. I remembered how large the case was. It was an inspiration. I took a lamp to the shed, and I opened and emptied the case, hiding the books away. Then I returned to the house, and carried the dead man to the shed. He was heavy, Muriel, but I was always strong, and had he been twice as heavy I should have been able to carry him that

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night. You see, I knew how necessary it was to hide him. The case I had left in the cart, and I lifted the dead man into it, and nailed it down tightly—tighter than it was before. There was a label on it in Mr. Quixley's handwriting: "Rubbish only—to be left in the cellar." '

'How horrible!' said Muriel.

'Next morning Tramp took it, covered by vegetables and potatoes for Mrs. Chenneby, to Docksmouth, and, without knowing what his burden was, delivered it to Mr. Tuke, who placed it in the house next door. It is there now.'

Muriel hid her face and shuddered.

'That is why I came to live here. That is why you have found me working in the cellar. I had to get through the wall into the next house. I had to dig a grave. It has become necessary to bury the body because of Mark Olroyd.'

'Does he know?'

'Something, not all. I managed to place the will in Mr. Quixley's room at the Gate House one day when I called to see Mark Olroyd there. I pretended to faint, and, while he had gone to fetch me a glass of wine, I slipped the will between the leaves of a book, where he afterwards found it. Later he must have watched us that night at the bonfire, when I burnt the books I had

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taken from the case, and when you picked up some papers and letters addressed to Mr. Quixley. Mark Olroyd used the knowledge to force you to marry him. He has been searching next door to find out more.'

'Great heavens! has he found it?'

'No.'

The answer was sharp and sudden. Mrs. Wingfield was roused to excitement by the question, and stood up.

'No. Last night I went to get the body. I know the case. It has a mark upon it. I saw it last night, but as I went towards it a ghost—a ghost, Muriel!—came creeping down the stairs, and I dared not go on.'

Muriel looked at her. Surely no woman had ever disbelieved more firmly in ghosts than her mother. Was the whole story a fabrication of her brain, after all? 'A ghost!' she said feebly.

'You do not believe what I have told you. Come and see.'

Mrs. Wingfield took the key from the table. Muriel shrank back. It was too horrible.

'Come and see,' said Mrs. Wingfield from the doorway.

She could not let her mother go alone, and she followed her.

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CHAPTER XXII

BOOKS—ONLY BOOKS!

MR. TUKE sat on the end of his counter looking up at that corner of the shop where he seemed to keep his knowledge. Whenever he had to give an opinion or a decided answer, he invariably glanced there first, and as a rule appeared to receive help. This morning something was evidently wrong, for, whether he looked there with his spectacles pushed up on to his forehead, or let them fall upon his nose and looked through them, no help came.

'Dreaming, I expect,' he said at last, but he was not contented with the conclusion. 'Perhaps I have not been told everything.'

He got off the counter and abused the boy who was putting some books away upon a shelf. Then he went and stood with his hands under his coat-tails at the door of the shop.

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Tramp was packing vegetables in a cart, and Mr. Tuke watched him, perhaps hoping to find inspiration in doing so.

A lad came whistling down the street with his hands in his pockets, and almost made the bookseller start when he stopped in front of him and pulled out a letter.

'For you, Mr. Tuke.'

'Who from?'

'Gentleman at the Blue Lion.'

'Any answer wanted?'

'No.'

The lad put his hands in his pockets, started whistling again, and went back the way he had come.

Mr. Tuke opened the letter.

'DEAR MR. TUKE,

''If convenient to you, I intend to come and look through the cases in Mr. Quixley's house in Silver Street to-morrow morning. I think it right I should do so. Please do not trouble to answer this, as I am going to Dean to-day. On no account is Mr. Olroyd to have access to the house.

'Yours truly,

'RALPH CUNNINGHAM.'

'How is he to know whether it is convenient

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or not if I am not to send an answer,' muttered Mr. Tuke. 'I wonder what he expects to find?'

He stood for some time longer contemplating Tramp, and finally appeared to find inspiration, for he suddenly re-entered the shop.

'I shall be back presently,' he said to the boy, as he went out by a door at the back.

He walked quickly down a passage, opened a door at the end of it with a key which he took from his pocket, and descended to the cellars. A passage, or, rather, a series of small cellars, communicated by a door with the cellars under Mr. Quixley's house. There he paused and looked around him in the dim light. Packing-cases, heaps of parcels, and old books, which had never been touched since they were placed there, were lying about in all directions. Many of them had been there for years, and one corner which Mr. Tuke looked at more particularly was inches thick in dust.

'Mr. Cunningham will have a dirty job if he tackles all these,' he muttered.

He was moving from the corner, when he stopped suddenly. The sound of voices or of a voice struck his ear. The cellar was divided into many partitions, and he could not locate the sound. He did not want to be seen. He felt that he was on the edge of a discovery.

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The voice was faint, but quite distinct.

'I dug that,' it said. 'It was a labour and took some nights. Should I have done that if my story were not true? There is the earth, the spade, and that small sack contains packets of quicklime. Now come. You will have to crawl through. I have done it often. It is easy, and there is no fear in the day.'

Silence followed. There was no answering voice. Was the speaker alone, and talking thus to herself? Mr. Tuke thought it quite likely. He did not move, but strained his eyes to find some unfamiliar light in the dim surroundings.

The silence was followed by a creeping sound, the rustle of a dress, and then the shuffling of feet.

'These are the cellars under the house. Look at the rubbish in all directions. The storage place. It is as I told you.'

The voice was near now, and Mr. Tuke looked steadily towards one corner, drawing himself further back to escape observation.

From behind a partition came a woman walking boldly, as knowing her way, and certain of her footsteps amongst the rubbish. Immediately followed another woman, slimmer in figure and stepping cautiously. It was evident that she was

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a stranger here. To all that was said, to every question asked, she returned no answer.

'Follow me closely,' said the first. 'It is like our own, only reversed. The steps are yonder.'

She did not look in Mr. Tuke's direction, but went straight to the steps which led up into the house, and her companion followed her timidly.

When he heard the door at the head of the stairs open, Mr. Tuke came from his concealment and went up after them. He went slowly. He did not want to disturb, nor interrupt them.

They had not closed the door at the top, and before he had reached it he heard the woman say:

'It was here I stood last night.'

'He was not dreaming,' muttered the bookseller.

'The moonlight struck here, and I stepped into it when I heard the steps above—low, muffled, but coming nearer. The moonlight struck, too, at the head of the stairs there, and as I listened my eyes were fixed there waiting. Then it came, after how long I cannot tell; but it came slowly, that white face and that hand creeping down the banisters.'

Mr. Tuke stood still upon the steps. He dared not go on until he heard their feet move.

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'See, that is it. There is a triangle on the end of it. Come, and you shall know that my story is true. Everyone will know it soon.'

'Oh, no, no! It is too horible.'

'Come. You must. You shall.'

It sounded to the listener as though the speaker took hold of her companion and forced her onwards, for their feet made a rapid movement. Then Mr. Tuke came into the hall and crept along until he could see through the banister into the room which they had entered. He had not seen their faces until now, although he had guessed who they were. Mrs. Wingfield had a chisel in her hand, and Muriel stood trembling beside her.

'There were cases and parcels piled upon it until the day before yesterday, but Mark Olroyd had searched through them all, and had come to this one when he was interrupted.

Mr. Tuke wondered if she could possibly have stood then where he stood now.

'Look, Muriel! The label! "Rubbish only—to be left in the cellar."'

'Yes, mother; let us go back now.'

'Go back!' exclaimed Mrs. Wingfield excitedly. 'Go back—now!'

'Yes, yes. Indeed I believe your story.'

'I have been a fool to work in the night,'

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cried her mother. 'Ghosts are here then. The daylight is for work, when there is nobody here. It is the opportunity I have sought. I am glad we came. I am glad I told you the secret. We can do everything now. The grave is ready. Muriel, Muriel, help me! Run quickly and bring the large sack.'

'Oh, no, no! Come away, mother! come away!'

She laid her hand on her mother's arm, but Mrs. Wingfield shook it off. Her excitement now was intense.

'Time is precious. I do not want your help. I will carry it there. Stand away, Muriel.'

'Mother! Mother!'

'Stand away.'

Mrs. Wingfield fell upon her knees beside the case, and thrust the chisel in between the planks which covered it. The chisel slipped in without much difficulty, for it was placed in almost the exact spot where Olroyd had inserted his

'I nailed it tightly,' she said. 'I told you I nailed it tightly.'

Muriel stood with her hands over her face. What awful sight was she to see? Mr. Tuke watched through the banisters.

Mrs. Wingfield's strong hands worked backwards and forwards, driving the chisel in.

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Deeper and deeper it went, and the wood cracked and gave. A piece was wrenched up. Then with her hands she tore the planks up fiercely, and the splinters tore her fingers. Mr. Tuke could see the blood come.

'Muriel!' Mrs. Wingfield sprang to her feet and cried out. Muriel dared not look. She clasped her hands more closely before her face, every moment expecting her mother to tear them away and compel her to look upon the horrible thing.

There was a moment of strange silence. Even Mr. Tuke held his breath.

Then came a laugh, shrill and discordant.

'Books! Only books!'

Muriel looked. There was nothing horrible to see. The case was full of old books, neatly packed. A great joy leaped into her heart in spite of her mother's death-pale face and staring eyes. The whole terrible story was born of her mother's imagination.

'Mother!'

'Books! Books! Only books!'

Another moment of strange silence, and then shriek after shriek of wild laughter—laughter that was no laughter, which rang and echoed through the empty house; mad laughter, which must have been heard even to the end of Silver Street.

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THEN WITH HER HANDS SHE TORE THE PLANKS UP FIERCELY.

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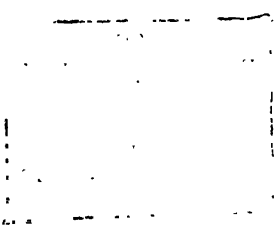

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CHAPTER XXIII

MISS WINGFIELD IS ENGAGED

MURIEL caught her mother in her arms and tried to quiet her.

'Books!' cried the frantic woman, waving her arms wildly.

'Yes, mother, only books. Come back now; we will talk about it presently.'

But Muriel's voice had no soothing effect. For a moment Mrs. Wingfield would be silent, but it was only to burst out again into laughter—wilder, madder than ever.

Seeing that the girl's task was hopeless, Mr. Tuke came forward, intimating his presence by a preliminary cough.

'You had better let me help you,' he said.

Mrs. Wingfield looked at him and laughed.

'Only books!' she said.

Muriel turned pale at his coming. They had

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no right to be there at all, to begin with, but that was nothing to the fact that he must have heard her mother's wild words. How much had he heard? How much had he seen?

'Young lady, we had better get your mother home. You know who I am—Mr. Tuke. We will take her together.'

'We came——' and Muriel paused.

'I know, Miss Wingfield. Do not let that distress you. We will take her by the front-door if we can only quiet her.'

'Mother dear, we are going to take you home. Come.'

She laughed as they led her into the hall, and she made a movement to go towards the cellar steps.

'My dear madam, it is much easier this way,' said Mr. Tuke. 'Do not laugh until you get home; it might disturb someone in the street. It would be a pity to do that, wouldn't it?'

Mrs. Wingfield looked at him, and then nodded her head knowingly. The force of the argument seemed to strike her. She closed her lips tightly and clenched her fists, compelling herself to silence, and they quickly got her into her own house.

'Now, my dear young lady,' said Mr. Tuke to

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Muriel, when he had helped Mrs. Wingfield to a chair, 'you send for a doctor at once. This is a serious business, unless I am much mistaken. Why not go yourself, and I will stay with your mother?'

'I cannot leave her.'

'Send the servant, then. Dr. Brooks is as good a man as any, if you do not happen to have had a doctor since you have been in Docksmouth.'

Muriel went to the kitchen to Mary.

'What is the matter, miss?'

'Your mistress is taken ill. I want you to go for Dr. Brooks—at the corner of East Street, you know—and ask him to come at once.'

'What's made her ill, miss?'

'Don't stand there asking questions, but go at once.'

The little servant was so unused to harsh words from Muriel that she at once concluded there was more mystery in the air.

Dr. Brooks came, and in answer to his questions was told that Mrs. Wingfield had received a sudden shock on account of the terrible death of a former friend of hers, a friend whose life had been intimately and painfully connected with her own. She had got into an exceedingly morbid

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state before receiving this shock, and for five years she had lived a life of worry, which had been much increased lately. Mr. Tuke had helped Muriel to conceive this way of telling the story before the doctor arrived.

Dr. Brooks looked very grave when Muriel questioned him.

'Will she recover?' she asked.

'Her life is in no actual danger.'

'I mean her reason.'

'I am not able to say at present,' he answered. 'The effect may be temporary. Your mother is constitutionally a strong woman, and that is in her favour; but I must not conceal from you that I think very seriously of her.'

Later in the day a nurse came—Dr. Brooks said it was imperative—and it was not until then that Mr. Tuke thought of going.

'This has been very trying for you, Miss Wingfield,' he said to Muriel.

'You have been very kind.'

'Well, well, perhaps everything works out for the best. Now, about Mr. Olroyd?'

'What about him?'

'You would like to see him?'

'Indeed I should not.'

'I rather expected that answer,' said the book-

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seller. 'I do not expect Mr. Olroyd will trouble you much more. Is there anyone else you would like to see?'

Muriel looked at him inquiringly.

'Yes, I mean the other one,' he said with a smile. 'Now, you just sit down and write a line to him asking him to come. He is to see me to-morrow, and shall have the note. I know a good deal about this affair.'

'What do you know?'

'That if you ask him, Mr. Cunningham will be here to see you to-morrow.'

'But about my mother. Did you hear what she said to me?'

'Some of it, not all. I shall not speak of it. You may trust me.'

Muriel sat down and wrote the letter, and Mr. Tuke took his departure.

'I was not told everything,' he said to himself as he went down Silver Street, 'but I fancy I know the truth now.'

It was an anxious night for Muriel, yet a sense of relief was upon her. Her mother's story was not true; trouble had unhinged her reason. But where was Mr. Quixley's body, and how did he die? The questions would come, and she could find no answer to them. Still, the body was not

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in that case with the triangle upon it; only books were there.

Next morning Mrs. Wingfield was quieter, but there was no other change. The presence of the nurse in her room she did not seem to mind at all, but directly she saw her daughter she was troubled. Her brow puckered at once as though Muriel's face recalled to her recollection something painful, and Dr. Brooks decided that Muriel must keep away from her altogether for the present.

It was in the afternoon that the hall door bell rang, and Mary went to answer it.

'You!' she said. 'Now you've done it. I told you not to come here. Catch me carrying notes again!'

Cunningham smiled.

'I was sent for, Mary.'

'Was you—sure?'

'Sure.'

'Then, you'd better come in. You can't see the mistress; she's ill in bed.'

'Will you tell Miss Wingfield that I have come.

The romance was moving again, and the little servant was excited—so excited, indeed, that she left the visitor standing on the mat and went to the sitting-room door.

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'He's come, miss.'

Muriel had seen him from the window. Only with difficulty had she restrained herself from rushing out to meet him.

'Ask him to come in, Mary.'

Ralph entered and stood still. There was something on the mantelpiece which Mary wanted, or pretended to want, and she crossed the room slowly to get it. To be there at the most exciting part of the romance, and yet not to see it, seemed hard. She did her best, but her artifice failed, and she had to go out, and returned to the kitchen muttering to herself: 'Well, if he ain't a cold lover, and no mistake!'

As the door closed Cunningham stepped forward.

'Muriel!'

'Ralph!'

She lay in his arms and sobbed for some time. Her feelings had been pent up so long, it was a relief to sob now; and Ralph held her close to him in silence, knowing it was best.

'I didn't mean what I said on the beach that night,' she said presently. 'It almost broke my heart to say it.'

'I know, dear—I know.'

'It has been such a terrible time, Ralph.'

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'Terrible indeed.'

Then, in each other's arms, they were silent for a long time.

'Do you know what happened yesterday?' Muriel said at last.

'Yes; Mr. Tuke told me. But sit down, Muriel, and tell me yourself. I do not quite understand Mr. Tuke. He always appears to me to be telling only half a tale.'

They sat down together hand in hand, while Muriel repeated to him all the story which her mother had told her, and all that had happened yesterday.

'Did Mr. Tuke tell you all this?' she asked.

'He told me nothing about Mark Olroyd.'

'He could not know about him. Mother talked of him before she took me in next door. Oh, Ralph, it was horrible! When I saw that the case contained only books I could have shrieked for joy.'

'The doctor thinks seriously of Mrs. Wingfield's condition, Mr. Tuke tells me.'

'He was more hopeful this morning, I think.'

'I do not understand it a bit, Muriel. I do not want to distress you, my dearest, but do you think your mother knows anything about Mr. Quixley?'

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'I cannot think she does, and yet—— Do you remember the night you first came to the cottage?'

'Am I ever likely to forget it?'

'I mean with regard to mother. Did she look, did she behave, like a woman who had just gone through anything like she says she did that night?'

'No. That part of her story she has evidently imagined; but I do not understand a woman like Mrs. Wingfield giving way so completely as this without some great cause.'

'Nor do I, Ralph; still, the body was not in that case, and her imagination told her it was. She would hardly have gone to all the trouble she did unless she believed it was there.'

'Mr. Quixley is a mystery still,' Ralph answered. 'We shall not solve the mystery by talking about it.'

He put his arm round her and kissed her, but Muriel could not change the subject quite so easily.

'Ralph!'

'Dearest?'

'Supposing mother does know something—something dreadful, I mean—I should have——'

'Well?'

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'I should have to send you away again.'

'Why?'

'Think of it: the mother of your wife a——'

'Hush, my darling. There is nothing in the world shall part us—at least, only one thing.'

'What is that?' she asked, a little startled.

'Just a statement that you do not love me.'

'Ralph!'

'Then, there is nothing in the world can part us,' he said, as the pretty head rested on his shoulder. 'And I want you to promise me something. This illness of your mother's may be of long duration. I want you to marry me quietly, soon—very soon. You want someone to care for you, to protect you. This scoundrel Olroyd is certain to molest you so long as you remain as you are. Will you promise me, Muriel?'

'Yes,' she answered, and then after a pause she went on: 'Do you think Mark Olroyd knows anything?'

'I do not think he does. He may have seen you at the bonfire that night, and seen that your mother wished to hide something. I believe his knowledge begins and ends there.'

'That bonfire,' said Muriel reflectively. 'If

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mother knows nothing, how was it she was burning papers and letters belonging to Mr. Quixley?'

'I cannot explain that, but one thing is quite clear: your mother was to some extent in Mr. Quixley's confidence, since she delivered things to Mr. Tuke for him. Is it not possible that she had Mr. Quixley's instructions to burn those letters?'

'Then, why should she mind my looking at them?'

'Mr. Quixley had only just disappeared; she may have feared what you might think.'

'Do you really believe that, Ralph, or are you only saying it to comfort me?'

'It is the only explanation I can imagine. Now let us talk of our plans.'

This was a pleasanter theme, and they were soon absorbed in it. Together they built strong castles and gorgeous palaces which, founded on love as they were, seemed destined to withstand the ravages of Time. Youth was theirs, and the future lay before them, an undiscovered country. Why should they not hope to find it a pleasant land where dreams come true, and where carking care and sorrow find no soil to grow in? Other lovers have entered its dim, unknown woods

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happily hand in hand, and have stepped, still happily, into another land where is certainty.

Suddenly Muriel started up.

'What is it?'

'Mark Olroyd has just come to the door. I caught sight of him through the window.'

'Say you are engaged.'

Muriel opened the room door as the bell rang and as Mary came from the kitchen.

'I am engaged, Mary, and cannot see him.'

'Very well, miss.'

They heard Mary open the door.

'Is Miss Wingfield in?'

'Yes, sir, but she's engaged most particular.'

'She will see me,' said Olroyd, stepping in.

'She won't.'

'Will you kindly tell her it is Mr. Olroyd.'

'She knows that well enough, but she's engaged and can't see you, and I want to shut the door.'

'I think this is a case for me to settle,' said Ralph grimly. And before Muriel could prevent him he had gone into the hall. 'Miss Wingfield is engaged,' he said.

'So you are here?' said Olroyd with a sneer. 'I presume Miss Wingfield is aware what her refusal to see me means?'

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'Oh yes, quite. We were discussing it only just now, and have decided to run the risk of any story you can tell.'

'I thought this was Mrs. Wingfield's house,' said Olroyd airily.

'It was Miss Wingfield you asked for, and her answer is that she is engaged. Good-afternoon.'

'Have a care, Ralph Cunningham.'

'If all I hear of you is true, Mr. Olroyd, permit me to offer you the same advice,' said Cunningham, and he closed the door.

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CHAPTER XXIV

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

As the door closed Mary felt that she had not lived in vain, after all. To be a witness of the discomfiture of Mr. Olroyd was some consolation for her disappointment at not seeing the real meeting of the lovers that afternoon, and she returned to the kitchen satisfied. Mary's imagination was fired, and, as is the case with some more level-headed people than she was, she found it exceedingly difficult that evening to draw a sharp line between fact and fiction. It did not require great inventive power to conceive what must have occurred between her young mistress and Mr. Cunningham directly she had closed the door upon them, and Mary had no intention of telling an untruth when, later on, she recounted to Tramp what had happened.

'We've had fine doings here to-day, I can tell you.'

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'The missus worse?'

Few were more concerned about Mrs. Wingfield than Tramp was. He had wit enough to understand what a real friend she had been to him, and heart enough to be grateful.

'It was nothing to do with her,' Mary answered. 'There comes a ring at the bell this afternoon, and I goes to the door, and who do you think it was?'

'Someun as wanted to come in.'

'Someone as did come in—Mr. Cunningham. Miss Muriel had sent for him.'

'What for?'

'What does a woman generally send for a man for?'

Tramp was equal to even such an abstruse question as this.

'Depends. If he happens to be a gardener, to tell him about the garden; if he happens——'

'Ain't Mr. Cunningham in love with her?' asked Mary in disgust.

'Never heard him say one way or the other,' Tramp answered.

'Well, he is, and he's been contemplatin' suicide during temporary insanity ever since he found out that Miss Muriel was a-goin' to marry Mr. Olroyd. So you can just think what a state

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he was in when she sends for him and lets him know that she ain't a-goin' to do nothin' of the kind.'

'Did she tell him that?'

'Love ain't made up of words, Mr. Tramp. She just looks at him, and he understands, and then—— Well, if you'd 'a' seen them in each other's arms, a-cryin' and a-laughin' all at the same time, you'd 'a' wished you'd 'a' got someone to love you in the same way. I did.'

'Maybe, but I've had other things to do.'

'Made me feel that miserable and lonely for a bit,' Mary went on, 'that I could 'a' sat down and cried, that I could. There ain't nothin' in this world like love, Mr. Tramp, and if you ain't experienced it you ain't lived.'

'I ain't alive, then.'

'There comes another ring at the bell a little later on, and as I goes to the door Miss Muriel puts her head out of the dining-room and says as how she's engaged. Lor'! I didn't want no tellin', I knew that. Who do you think it was this time?'

'Taxes, maybe. They was round at Mrs. Chenneby's this afternoon.'

'It was Mr. Olroyd, lookin' as fierce as—well, I ain't seen a tiger, but I should think as fierce as him.'

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'And what did he want? He's a wrong un, he is.'

This seemed to be a point Tramp was certain about.

'Well, he wanted just what the other one had got, and was real mad 'cos he couldn't have it. I told him it was no good, but he wasn't goin' away, not him. Then Mr. Cunningham comes into the hall, and he says: "Miss Wingfield is engaged." I thought there was goin' to be a fight, but when Mr. Cunningham tells him that he'd better look to hisself, Mr. Olroyd goes ragin' down the street vowin' vengeance. What do you think he'll do, Mr. Tramp?'

'If it's love as he wants, I expect he'll get another girl. There's plenty of 'em about.'

There was a want of romance about Tramp which rather annoyed Mary.

The little servant's picture of Mark Olroyd going down Silver Street raging and vowing vengeance was not so wide of the mark as might be supposed. He had heard nothing of Mrs. Wingfield's sudden illness, and could only account for Ralph Cunningham's presence in the house by the supposition that she had decided to defy him, and to let him tell his tale if he would. And now that the time had come to tell it, what was it he

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really knew? Practically nothing. Mrs. Wingfield had burnt something in the bonfire that night which she did not want her daughter to see, and the sight of which had alarmed Muriel. Possibly it was a clue to the disappearance of Mr. Quixley, but to whom was he to tell such a story? Ralph Cunningham was out of the question, and to tell it to the police just now would be rather dangerous. He, in his turn, might be asked awkward questions. He was not prepared to answer questions until those bonds, at least, were again in his possession, and up to the present Mr. Biedermann had failed to get them. Other liabilities, too, were pressing upon him, and how was he to put them off? His marriage with Muriel Wingfield would have made everything easy, but how could he compel her to marry him now?

'I am in a tight corner,' he said to himself. 'Cunningham would marry her even if I told my story, even if there were anything against her mother. If the worst comes to the worst, I can—I'll call in and see Biedermann first.'

Mr. Biedermann was out, and was not expected in before eight o'clock.

'Ask him to come over and see me directly he comes back.'

'Yes, sir.'

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Olroyd went back to the office, and the post which had come in during his absence was a depressing one. All his creditors seemed to have taken it into their heads to worry him together.

'I wonder if anyone has been spreading a report that I am pressed for money. Surely Biedermann cannot have done so? Oh no, of course not; I could make it too unpleasant for him.'

But one letter staggered him more than all the others. It was from Ward and Ward the solicitors of Chancery Lane, and was to the effect that, as he had not forwarded the bonds mentioned in their former letter, one of the partners in the firm would call upon him early to-morrow, when he was requested to have them ready.

Olroyd sat staring at this letter for some time. It was not altogether unexpected, but now that it had come its significance was not lost upon him. The corner was indeed a tight one. He got up, and, opening a drawer in the safe, took from it some notes and gold, which he had drawn from the bank that day—two hundred pounds.

'Not much, but with care it will carry me far,' he said, putting the money into his pocket.

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For an hour he busied himself in the office, and then went up to his own rooms, taking a Bradshaw with him.

As before, when he had waited for Mr. Biedermann, he could eat little, and, as before, he had frequent recourse to the whisky decanter and the soda siphon. But he did not pace up and down the room on this occasion. He beguiled the time by a careful and somewhat minute study of Bradshaw.

To-night Mr. Biedermann did not keep him waiting so long. It was only just after eight o'clock when the housekeeper announced him.

'I got your message.'

'Have you got the bonds?'

'No. It's no good, Olroyd; I can't get them.'

'You mean you won't.'

'I mean nothing of the kind,' said Mr. Biedermann, helping himself to whisky. 'The fact is, you have run this business too close.'

'I've played for a fortune and won it, and now these bonds will rob me of it. Look here, Biedermann, make your own terms, only get me those bonds.'

'If you were to give me an undertaking to pay me ten thousand pounds the day after your

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marriage with Muriel Wingfield, I could not get them.'

'You can read that,' Olroyd said, throwing Ward and Ward's letter across the table to him.

Biedermann read it and whistled.

'Looks uncommonly as if your wedding would have to be postponed, doesn't it? I suppose that would have happened any way, though, now that Mrs. Wingfield is so ill.'

'Ill! Mrs. Wingfield?'

'Yes; didn't you know? She had some kind of shock yesterday, and is likely to lose her reason altogether, I am told.'

'No, I had not heard of it. I have not seen Miss Wingfield to-day. Who told you?'

'Upon my word, I forget. I hear most things that happen in Docksmouth somehow or other, and I never remember who tells me. I heard another thing which, of course, I laughed at, knowing better.'

'What was that?'

'Somebody told me that Muriel Wingfield was going to marry that fellow Cunningham. Absurd rumour, isn't it?'

Olroyd glanced at his companion, who was drinking his whisky. Was Biedermann playing with him?

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'Most absurd,' he said.

'Very curious how these things get about,' said Biedermann. 'Yes, this letter is awkward, isn't it? What are you going to do?'

'It's awkward enough, not only for me, but for the holder of the bonds.'

'Unpleasant, certainly. Nobody likes being mixed up, even remotely, in a swindle.'

'I am sorry to have dragged you into it,' said Olroyd.

'I do not quite see how you have.'

'I'm tired of the whole business,' Olroyd went on, 'and I intend to face the music and own up. With those bonds in my possession I should be safe; without them I am done. If I own up, I must, of course, say to whom I gave the bonds.'

'Well?'

'That won't be very pleasant for you, will it?'

'Upon my word, I don't see what difference it makes to me. You didn't stick a notice on the bonds that you had stolen them.'

'But you knew it.'

'I suppose in owning up you will make that statement?'

'When I own up I shall probably tell the whole truth.'

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'It will be the very first time in your life, then,' said Biedermann.

'When a man has gone all the other way, in his reformation he is apt to fly to extremes,' said Olroyd.

'Very clever, my boy; but you ought to know me well enough by this time to see how futile it is to try and play that game with me. I'm not the kind of man to be threatened. Shall I give you a real friendly piece of advice? I see you have the Bradshaw there. You look out the first train that will take you into a quiet and safe retreat, and you catch it.'

'Thanks. One for me and two for yourself.'

'As you please; but your position is becoming known, and if you have put off anyone else with the prospect of your marriage to Muriel Wingfield, give up any idea that that is going to save you, because it isn't. She is going to marry Mr. Ralph Cunningham, and you know it as well as I do.'

Mr. Biedermann put out his hand for the whisky decanter.

'Excuse me,' said Olroyd, laying his hand upon it. 'This, at least, is mine at present, and I do not provide drink for my enemies.'

Biedermann laughed and rose from his chair.

'As you will, but I give you my word my

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advice is friendly. There comes a time to nearly every man when he has to stand alone, and I've a notion that that time has come for you. You've been too reckless, my boy, and that's a fact.'

Olroyd looked at him with a smile upon his lips.

'I've never professed to much virtue, Biedermann, but if I deserve whips, you would get scorpions if you came by your own. Good-night. I shall be glad if you will go.'

'Good-bye,' said Mr. Biedermann, and he left the room.

In his way, he was sorry for Mark Olroyd, but he had little patience with a man who put himself within reach of the law's clutches. His standard of morality did not require a man to be absolutely honest, but it admitted a wide difference between such a one and the man who was fool enough to be found out. It was a fact that all the business he had negotiated for Mark Olroyd had apparently been straightforward, although he had at times had shrewd suspicions. The name and standing of the firm, however, was a guarantee of honesty, and he had no business with anything else. Possibly Olroyd's measure of his due was not far out.

Olroyd drank another glass of whisky-and-soda,

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and looked at Bradshaw once more before rising from his seat.

'Ten-forty. I can catch that. It is easier to get lost in London than anywhere else.'

He went into his bedroom and packed a portmanteau hastily. He would have a good twelve hours' start before any inquiries were made about him, and if they managed to catch him then, they deserved to have him.

He brought the portmanteau into the sitting-room, and put it on a chair.

'Money,' he said, tapping his pocket, 'cigar-case.' He took it from the mantelpiece. 'I think that is all.'

He put on his hat, threw an overcoat over his arm, took up the portmanteau, and was about to turn the lamp out, when there was a knock at the front-door.

'Who's that, now? Biedermann repented, perhaps.'

He listened. Nobody was coming upstairs.

'Somebody for the housekeeper,' he said to himself.

He listened again. Somebody was coming up the stairs.

There was a knock at the door, and, without waiting for an answer, there entered a small old

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gentleman, muffled up in a great-coat as though it were the depth of winter. His hair was thin and white, his face was thin and white too, and he was a little out of breath from climbing the stairs. He advanced about two yards into the room and stopped.

'Good-evening, Mr. Olroyd. Pray excuse the hour, but I've come for those bonds of mine.'

For a moment Olroyd stood speechless. The coat slipped from his arm, and the portmanteau fell with a thud upon the floor.

'Great heavens!' he gasped, 'Mr. Quixley!'

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"GREAT HEAVENS!" HE GASPED. "MR. QUIXLEY!"

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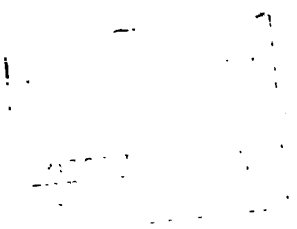

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CHAPTER XXV

AT THE BOOKSELLER'S

He was a grim little old man, but something very like a smile flitted across his face as he saw Olroyd's confusion.

'Yes,' he said, 'Mr. Quixley, and he wants his bonds.'

'My surprise is pardonable under the circumstances,' Olroyd said with an effort. 'I suppose you really are Mr. Quixley, and not his ghost?'

'The man, sir, not the ghost.'

'I congratulate you on being in the land of the living.'

'It will be more to the purpose, sir, if you will kindly hand me my bonds.'

With a desperate attempt to seize his last chance, Olroyd managed to laugh as he glanced at the clock.

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'It is rather a late hour for business, Mr. Quixley.'

'Had it been five minutes later I should have missed you altogether, it seems,' said the old man, pointing to the portmanteau and coat lying on the floor.

Olroyd picked them up and put them on a chair. The action gave him a moment for reflection. He was tempted to silence this unwelcome visitor for an hour or two. Two or three hours were of such vital importance to him just now.

'You would certainly not have seen me until business hours to-morrow. However, as you have already delayed me, I suppose I must make an exception in your case, and transact business with you between ten and eleven at night.'

'If you please.'

'I must ask you to give me a letter instead of the ordinary receipt for the bonds, setting forth that you called and received them yourself. I require this, as I have a demand from your solicitors, Ward and Ward, of Chancery Lane, to have the bonds ready to hand over to one of the partners in the firm first thing to-morrow morning. You seem to do business in rather an irregular way, Mr. Quixley'

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'A letter? Certainly.'

'Here is pen and ink. Will you sit down, Mr. Quixley.'

The old man sat down at the table and took up the pen. Possibly his ready acquiescence saved him, for Olroyd experienced a terrible temptation to strike him down. As the old man was fool enough to trust him, there was no need to do so. Olroyd took out his keys.

'While you write the letter, I will go and fetch the bonds from the safe downstairs.'

'Very well.'

'May I offer you some whisky?'

'Seldom touch it,' was the short answer.

Olroyd left the room, closing the door after him, and regretting that the key was not in the lock outside. Still, the position might have been worse, and there is ever consolation in such a thought. His coolness had saved him. He went down the stairs quickly, took a hat from the hall stand, and opened the front-door.

'I beg your pardon.'

Olroyd started back from the man who was waiting just outside, and as he turned he saw another man in the hall, who until that moment must have stood concealed in one of the doorways.

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'I regret that I cannot let you pass, Mr. Olroyd, said the man, who now came in and closed the door.

Mark Olroyd asked no questions. He knew the men were police officers; he knew that the game was played out and that he had lost.

Mr. Quixley came slowly down the stairs.

'You have my bonds, Mr. Olroyd?'

Olroyd glared at him in impotent rage.

The old man shrugged his shoulders as he looked at the officers.

'I have no further business here,' he said, and passed into the street.

It was a short journey which Mark Olroyd took that night—only to the end of the High Street where the police-station was. The fraudulent use of the bonds was not the only thing against him. It was only the culminating point in a long series of frauds, and there were heavier losers than Mr. Quixley. As the door was locked upon him, Olroyd recognised that his position was hopeless. But one small measure of revenge seemed yet to be in his power. He had no doubt now that Biedermann had been false to him. Biedermann had virtually been his partner in many a shady transaction, only he had been the cleverer of the two. Still, it should not be

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difficult to implicate him, and the prisoner spent the sleepless watches of the night in making his plans.

The old man walked slowly towards Silver Street, and, even had it been light enough to study his face, it would have been impossible to tell whether he was pleased with the night's work or not. Possibly some incidents of his own life rose up before him, and wore a more sinister aspect now than they were wont to do. It is wonderful how different our actions look when viewed through the spectacles which time, experience, and, perchance, repentance, have helped to make. What we prided ourselves upon twenty years ago, and considered only an excellent stroke of business, is apt to appear something very like swindling when looked at to-day through our spectacles of wider vision.

He rang Mr. Tuke's bell, and the bookseller himself let him in. Mr. Tuke closed and barred the door in silence, and led the way to a room on the first floor, a comfortable sitting-room, which had evidently been constantly used for some time past. Mr. Quixley threw his hat and coat on to a chair and sat down.

'You found him?' asked the bookseller.

'Yes.'

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'Well?'

'Locked up by this time.'

'And serve him right, too.'

'I dare say, Tuke—I dare say; and it would serve a good many others right who are never likely to experience the inconvenience.'

'Very possibly. We don't all get what we deserve in this world, but I have little doubt a fair balance will be struck in the next.'

Mr. Quixley moved somewhat uneasily in his chair, as though the prospect were not altogether a pleasant one.

'There was nothing personal in my remark.'

'No, Tuke—oh no; I did not suppose so.'

'What is to be done next?' asked the bookseller. 'You will be glad to get out of your prison as soon as possible.'

'That's the right word for it, Tuke—my prison. Yes, I shall be glad to get out of it, but the confinement has done me good. I have learnt many things since I have been in this room. I can even be sorry for poor Olroyd to-night.'

'I shouldn't waste sympathy.'

'You do not quite understand. If my speculations had not been successful I might have been tempted, and gone the same way as he has done.

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I have learnt in this room, Tuke, that it is often a very thin line which divides the so-called prosperous business man from the thief.'

Mr. Tuke allowed his spectacles to drop on to his nose, but, not having the corner of the shop handy to look up at, he could find no answer to this remark.

'We must tell those young people the truth, Tuke,' said Mr. Quixley. 'It will be best for you to do it.'

'You forget that I do not know the whole truth. You have only told me part of a story.'

'Tell them what you know, and then produce me as evidence.'

'To-morrow?'

'Why not?'

'I will send and ask them both to come here.'

'There is no one else we ought to tell, I suppose?' said Mr. Quixley.

'You can answer that question better than I can,' was the answer.

'How is Mrs. Wingfield?'

'About the same.'

'Tell the young people, then. Good-night. I am going to bed.'

The short note which Muriel received by hand next morning asking her to go to Mr. Tuke's

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shop that afternoon surprised her, but, as the note said it was a matter important to herself, she sent word back that she would be there.

Mr. Tuke was waiting for her when she entered the shop.

'Do you mind coming this way, my dear young lady? Mind—one step down. This room, please. Will you go in? I need not introduce you to Mr. Cunningham.'

Ralph, who was the only other person present, got up and took her hands in his.

'What does this mean, Ralph?'

'I am as much in the dark as you are. Our friend, Mr. Tuke here, promised me an explanation as soon as you arrived.'

'Which promise I will fulfil,' said the bookseller, closing the door. 'Won't you sit down?'

Mr. Tuke pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead.

'I take it, Mr. Cunningham, that Miss Wingfield has corroborated my story of how her mother was taken ill in Mr. Quixley's house in Silver Street?'

'Yes.'

'Your mother was particular about one case,' he went on, turning to Muriel—'a case with a triangle on the end of it.'

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'And which contained nothing but books,' said Muriel.

'Precisely. Now, that case was delivered to me by your mother's man, Tramp, in the same way as he had previously delivered many others to me. As a rule, he used to help me through the shop with them, and sometimes down into the cellars if the case happened to be for storage only. When this case arrived I happened to be out, so it remained in the shop for some hours, and when I came in and saw it was only rubbish, and for storage, I got a man who was passing to help me. We carried it together into the passage outside this room, and then he said: "It's mighty heavy, governor, ain't it?" "Books usually are," I answered, and I gave him a shilling and got rid of him as soon as possible. When he had gone I dragged the case into this room and locked the door.'

Muriel and Ralph were both looking at him and listening intently.

'You are both asking me why, when the label said expressly that it was to be left in the cellar. Well, my dear young lady, I have handled books ever since I was so high, books singly, books in libraries, and books in cases, and I felt that that case did not contain books. It was not the weight

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which told me, it was the feel of the burden, the feeling that something in that case was alive.'

'Alive!' Muriel said.

'As we carried it, I felt certain that something moved inside, so I got rid of the man, dragged the case in here, and locked the door. The boards were tightly nailed down, but were not so close together as to exclude the air. I had that case open in a very short space of time. Now, my dear young lady, you must not be alarmed. The case did not contain books, but the body of Mr. Quixley.'

'Then, my mother's story was true?'

'Substantially, yes.'

'And you have known her story all this time?'

'On the contrary, I did not know it until I heard your mother tell you.'

'Be calm, Muriel,' said Ralph, going to her and putting his arm round her. 'I think, Mr. Tuke, you might have chosen a more gentle way of telling this horrible tale.'

'I dare say. I am not good at telling tales, but I haven't finished this one yet, and it isn't such a horrible story, after all. It was Mr. Quixley's body; but Mr. Quixley was not dead.'

'Not dead?' Muriel exclaimed.

'No. I lifted him out and put him on that

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sofa where you are now sitting, and I sent the boy for a doctor, a man who had not been long in Docksmouth, and who was not at all likely to know Mr. Quixley. I saw that Mr. Quixley had had a heavy blow on the head, and I told the doctor he had been brought into my shop in that condition, and that I knew the old gentleman as an occasional customer. You see, until I knew more about the mystery I did not want to say too much.'

'Is Mr. Quixley alive, Mr. Tuke?' asked Ralph impatiently.

But the bookseller was not to hurried in his narrative.

'He was a clever young fellow, that doctor, and between us we pulled the old gentleman round,' he went on. 'Mr. Quixley did not get well all in a hurry, but he made sure progress if it were slow. When he could talk about it, I told him how he came to be in my house, and he declared that he had no knowledge of how he came to be in the case, which in a way, I suppose, was true. All he said was that he had been the victim of foul-play. He never mentioned your mother, or his visit to her cottage that night. I knew nothing of it until I heard your mother tell the story, although, I admit, I had suspicions when she came

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to live next door to Mr. Quixley's house in Silver Street, and when Mr. Quixley told me the contents of his will. Until then my suspicions had rested upon Jervons, the butler at the Gate House, and upon you, Mr Cunningham.'

'Then, Mr. Quixley is alive and well?' said Muriel.

'As you are, Miss Wingfield.'

'Then, why has he kept in hiding all this time?' said Ralph.

He wanted to find out what the perpetrators of the crime would do.'

'It was no crime, it was an accident,' said Muriel.

'Well, he wanted to see how all those interested in him and his money would act. It was a whim of his, and for some will have a pleasant termination, I fancy. He has remained here in hiding ever since, going out for a short walk sometimes when it was quite dark, but chiefly taking his constitutional about his empty house. It has been a very material ghost which has frightened people in Silver Street from time to time lately. Mr. Quixley was the ghost which frightened your mother, my dear young lady. I have little doubt she recognised him, and thought she had really seen a ghost. When he

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came and told me that he had seen your mother in the house, I did not believe him. I thought he had been dreaming.'

'This is a wonderful story, Mr. Tuke,' said Ralph. 'Does anyone else know that Mr. Quixley is alive?'

'Yes—Mr. Biedermann. We took him into our confidence the other day, in order to get certain information which was necessary.'

'Mr. Biedermann is our landlord,' said Muriel.

Mr. Tuke nodded.

'And, if I am not mistaken, a friend of Mark Olroyd's,' said Ralph.

'I do not fancy he would thank you to call him a friend of Mr. Olroyd's, although I dare say you are right. Mr. Olroyd is the only other person who knows that Mr. Quixley is alive. Mr. Quixley called upon him last night to ask him about some bonds, and was only just in time to catch him. Had he been five minutes later, Mr. Olroyd would have been gone.'

'Then, Mr. Olroyd is——'

'Locked up, Mr. Cunningham. I think I told you, Miss Wingfield, that he was not likely to trouble you much more. I can see that you are both still inclined to doubt my story. Wait here. I will bring you my proof.'

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'I wonder whether he has told us the whole truth now,' said Ralph as the door closed upon the bookseller. 'For making the most of half a story, commend me to Mr. Tuke.'

'I think we know all now,' said Muriel.

'And the old man is alive.'

'But my mother's story was true,' Muriel answered.

'Quite true. By an accident Mr. Quixley stunned himself in her cottage, and, being overwrought and thinking him dead, she was afraid and hid the body.

'But the awful deliberation of it.'

'My dearest, forget it. It is doubtful if your mother has really been accountable for her actions for a long time past.'

'But, Ralph——'

She stopped, for the door opened and the little old man stood before them.

'Mr. Quixley!'

'Uncle!'

'One would almost suppose you were pleased to see me.'

'I am,' said Muriel. 'You cannot understand how pleased.'

'I think I do. And you, Ralph?'

'I am very pleased to see you alive and well.

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But you have given us a great deal of unnecessary trouble.'

'There you are wrong. I will tell you why in a moment. Sit down, Muriel, my dear, and tell me plainly all your mother said about me, and her story of that night in the cottage.'

Muriel told him. Once or twice, when she evidently attempted to smooth over her mother's harsh words, he rebuked her:

'Out with the plain truth, my dear.'

So Muriel told him everything without reserve.

When she had finished, Mr. Quixley was silent for a few moments. 'Your mother was quite right,' he said. 'I did ruin your father, and, I am sorry to say, rejoiced in it at the time. Since then I have repented, but your mother's indignation with me that night was justifiable. I feel convinced, my dear, that my fall was an accident. I was ill, very ill, at the time, and she was foolish to try and hide me away as she did. That is the extent of her sin, and I hope we shall talk it over some day together when she gets better. I may have given you trouble, my dear Ralph, but it has not been for nothing. I have learnt many things since I have been here, and when I go back to the Gate House I hope to leave my cloak of selfishness behind me. I have come to

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understand what a good fellow my nephew Ralph Cunningham is, and what my loss has been in shutting him out of my life as I have done. Your hand, my lad, and yours, my dear. There! Your old uncle, Stephen Quixley, hopes to grow young again in the reflection of your love. You are very like what your mother was at your age, my dear.'

'Am I? You were fond of my mother?'

'Yes, but until lately self was always first.'

'When do you return to Dean?' asked Ralph.

'To-morrow,' was the prompt answer. 'And although I don't want to bind you to Dean, you must come there very often. I shall make the cottage over to you, Ralph, and——'

'My dear uncle, I——'

'And I am going to alter my will. You shall not have it all, Muriel. You two shall go shares, half and half, after we've put a few others like Jervons out of reach of the poor-house. You have no idea what a lot of money there is.'

The old man was quite excited with his plans. He grasped Ralph's hand and kissed Muriel.

'You really are an abnormally tall woman, you know,' he said with a smile; 'I told you so before. I don't have to bend down to you at

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all. Yes, you must be often at Dean. I shall give up closing the gates at sundown, and if you two are expected they shall remain open all night. You shall always find a welcome at the Gate House.'

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CHAPTER XXVI

LOOKING FORWARD

Mr. Quixley's hope that he would one day talk over what had happened in the cottage that night with Mrs. Wingfield was not destined to be realized. By degrees her health improved, but her reason was gone, and the doctors gave no hope of her ever being better. For days, sometimes for weeks together, she would be quite calm, and was apparently happy, but her lucid moments were few and far between, and at intervals she became violent. She required constant watching and constant care, so it became necessary to remove her to a lunatic asylum. Muriel did not go to see her often. Mrs. Wingfield neither seemed to miss her daughter nor to want her, and almost invariably after one of Muriel's visits she had one of her bad attacks. Her daughter's presence seemed to

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puzzle and frighten her. She would look at her coldly for a long time without speaking, and would then say solemnly: 'Books! Only books!' Then she would laugh wildly, stopping in the middle of the laugh to utter a low cry of fear and to turn to the attendant for protection.

'You must not go again, dear,' Ralph said to his wife. 'It is bad for you and bad for your mother.'

It was strange that Mrs. Wingfield never talked about any of those she had known. She never mentioned her husband nor Mr. Quixley, and had apparently forgotten all about Ralph Cunningham and Mark Olroyd.

It is true that a great many people had found it convenient to forget Mark Olroyd. One does not care to publish one's former acquaintance with a felon. The charges brought against Mark Olroyd were very grave ones, and he was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. His disgrace broke his father's heart, and the firm of Olroyd, Newton, and Olroyd has ceased to exist.

Mr. Biedermann managed to weather the storm. Uncomplimentary things were said about him at Olroyd's trial, but although the law might abuse, it had not the power to bring him to trial. From first to last he had been clever enough to keep

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out of its clutches. He found Docksmouth anything but a pleasant place of residence, however, so moved to London, greatly to the benefit of the former place, and adding, it is to be feared, another plausible scoundrel to the already large crowd of such folk in the Metropolis. Still, the law knows how to wait, and perchance it may catch him some day.

Tramp remained in Docksmouth, working for both Mrs. Chenneby and Mr. Tuke. Nothing could induce him to go back to the cottage at Dean now Mrs. Wingfield was not there.

The cottage is very different now to what it was in the old days. A wing has been built on to it, and the interior altered out of all recognition. Two rooms have been thrown into one, the old staircase has been taken out, and a new one put in another place altogether; and you enter into a square hall, where a log-fire burns cosily in winter, and where flowers abound in the summer-time. It would trouble the young mistress herself to show you the room in which she slept so many years when she was a girl. It has vanished, partly into landing, partly into staircase, and if Muriel gets as far in the description as this, she will give the rest up as a bad job. There are good stables at the cottage, too, and Mrs. Ralph Cunningham's pair

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of ponies is a well-known sight in Dean and the neighbourhood.

Mr. Quixley has been heard to say that the cottage is altogether a finer place than the Gate House, and really seems to mean it, for he spends a great deal of his time there.

'I am dining at the cottage to-night, Jervons,' is his remark two, three, sometimes four, times in a fortnight, and Jervons smiles, rejoicing at the change in his master.

But in his heart of hearts Mr. Quixley knows that it is not the house he is thinking of when he compares it so favourably with his own. It is the people in it; it is the welcome that always awaits him there which makes the place so pleasant to him.

'I have a married son and daughter living not a stone's-throw from here,' he will say to a chance visitor at the Gate House. 'We will walk over and see them.' The statement is rather an astonishing one to those who thought they knew all about old Stephen Quixley.

Certainly the old man has never been so happy in his life, and he seems to have grown younger.

There are three servants at the cottage now, Mary being one of them; but there is a rumour that she is likely to leave soon. A story has

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been told—whether true or born of imagination it is impossible to say—to the effect that Tramp asked Mary to marry him; but however this may be, it is a fact that there is a young carpenter in the village who states openly, and apparently truthfully, that Mary up at the cottage is going to be his wife come next spring. He is an excellent fellow, but is singularly unromantic; so how the marriage will turn out must be left to the future.

And so we must leave all those we have known in this little history. Perhaps, could we lift a corner of the curtain which hides the future for a moment, we should see happy children in the garden of the cottage—a girl very like her mother, and a boy who is convinced that there is nobody in the world like his father. But it is only a glance we may get. It is the present now, and the corner of the curtain slips through our fingers and hides everything else.

THE END

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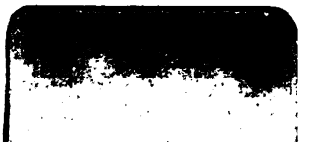

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